

Supporting learners with Special Educational Needs When school is closed

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Jessica: Hello everyone, my name is Jessica Minaeian and I work at Cambridge International in the Teaching and Learning team. I'm joined today by four teachers who are joining us from two international schools to talk about SEN, and inclusive education in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

So today's focus is on supporting SEN learners with their learning remotely so supporting them from home. So I'm joined by Leena and Padma, who are from Chirec International School and I'm joined by Teca and Bianca who are from Aubrick Multicultural, bilingual school.

We've had a question from a teacher which basically says I don't know how to support my learners who have SEN or additional needs online.

What advice or guidance which you give to a teacher to support their learners with SEN needs online?

Leena: I think, the most important advice which I would like to give teachers is in such uncertain times it is very, very important for the teachers to maintain a connection with the students who have special needs. Definitely with all students, but even so, it becomes very important that you maintain a connection with the students who have different needs or special education needs because they need that assurance from the teachers that the learning will continue. So that is one to erase any kind of anxiety, erase any little bit of apprehension about, 'where are we heading?' Or 'am I going to continue with my learning?' 'Am I going to see my teacher?' 'Am I going to talk to her?' so the emotional connect is very, very important. It is imperative that teachers continue with whatever they have been doing. What would be important is since you are not going to meet the students physically, it is very important that you continue creating that kind of motivation, recording something and sharing it with the teacher, or using different audio visual. Planning different kinds of activities which would generate interest among these students and also cater to their different needs. Is something which I would, from my side, I think would be the advice that I would like to give the teachers.

Jessica: Leena, that's so interesting. I love that you mentioned about keeping that connection with students and stuff. Bianca and Teca, how are you maintaining that connection with your students?

Bianca: I think I couldn't agree more with Leena and my advice is get closer to the family. Get closer to the therapist, try to keep that connection as Leena said. Be available for them. It could be any kind of communication that you can keep with the family and with a therapist. And above all, with the student themselves, individual feedback. Have individual meetings every week with these students. I think individual meetings every week with these students. I think this is the biggest advice I'd give to everyone who's giving support to SEN learners in remote learning.

Jessica: Yeah, I love that what you said about getting closer to your students. Padma, do you have anything to add on that?

Padma: Oh yes Jessica. So again nothing different. But yes, definitely, this is what we are doing. Keeping a connection to the various media. It could be emails, regular emails. I've been sending mails regularly keeping them connected through worksheets and then when they give it back they respond to the emails and they do the assignments and send it back very promptly. And that's how I'm maintaining the connection. And the parents are also free to communicate to me through the emails, which is also helping a lot with these children. Before, we did not have this regular connection with the parents. But since lockdown, since two months, we've been working with these children through the parents because children don't have their email IDs right now, so we connect through the parents to the child so all three of us are connected and this has really helped me to connect with our students and that works wonders.

Jessica: I loved that. You pointed out that your connection with the parents is almost better now than it was before. Has that been similar for everybody or has that been a pleasant outcome of this? Of the lock down?

Bianca: Yes, Jessica, I think so because we had to maintain contact with this family, so guarantee that their kids' rights would be part of our plans, right? The right to a differentiated plan, and that's what I was thinking about. Because they have a differentiated plan when we're at school, they should continue having that. They must know that they will have what they had when we were at school, right? I think this has to continue to guarantee these rights is very important and talking to the parents every now and then is it is very important to make it happen.

Padma: Jessica, in my classes we do the same thing as we used to do in the real time class. So every time I'm having an online class with the little ones. I generally start with a brain gym where they see me doing the brain gym and they do the other side. It's like that. Physical connectors there though we are not really physically in front of each other. That's how I'm keeping my students motivated I believe.

Jessica: That's a really nice connection actually, that you mentioned about keeping your kids motivated by modelling an activity. And I remember when I talked to you previously Teca about how some of your teachers, in the morning, they're sharing something quite personal that they are able to do with their students as a welcome. Could you share some of what your teachers are doing because I think it's wonderful?

Teca: Yes, every day our teachers from stage six to stage nine, they send a message that are recorded, a video message to the students trying to motivate them to face this big challenge and to try to help them organize their routine. Some of them sometimes read a poem or give more practical instructions or sing a song. They have been amazing trying to find ways to connect with the students and I think this makes a huge difference to the student routine because it's been hard for everyone.

Jessica: Can I touch on that then about routine? And so for some students with SEN needs and extra needs, routine is really very important and having that routine of school and my timetable and this is when my breaks are and these are the teachers that I see is really really important. How are you helping students for whom the lack of routine maybe is challenging? How would you advise teachers and parents and students to cope with that?

Leena: So like it was pointed out by a Bianca and Teca and Padma, here the bottom line is that: stay connected with the student as well as the parent. So one of the most positive outcomes of this online learning has been communication with the parents, so it has been important for us to keep in touch with the parents and talk to them about having a routine for the students, because that's what will give them that assurance that though things might be different in the sense they are not able to meet other friends and they are not able

to move around. But, having some kind of a routine where you, connect with your teacher at so and so time and then you have certain activities and then you have certain assignments to be done and a follow-up also is important. And that's where the parents in our school in my school have played a very important role in ensuring that the follow-up is happening. This was something which we were wanting to build upon and wanting to improve on that: how much more can we get our parents involved? but it has been a very heartening thing for us in this situation. All the parents are at home and they are actively involved in what the child is doing, and they're getting back to us with regular emails with regular feedback and speaking to us. So we are working at, continuing with having a routine for the students.

Bianca: Yeah, then I'd like to add to what Leena has just said. It's important to mention then that we are not only here talking about SEN learners who are having to adjust to a new routine, right? All our learners are having to adjust to these new routines and how is it that we can support them to do that? So we've been having some students who haven't been diagnosed with ADHD anything but even so, we know that student and we know how much he struggles with sometimes getting distracted or sometimes. Handing in their work, keeping up to deadlines you know. So what we have been doing as we said at the beginning, we have gotten closer to parents, and sometimes we're also talking about students whose parents are still having to go out because they work in the health area. So they're not at home with their children. So, uh, we have an assistant in middle school and he's been working as a buddy for these learners, so he gets closer to these learners every week. And for some learners, he meets with them every day: 'So what is it that you have today?' 'So let's take a look at your routine today.' 'What are the lessons that you you're having today?' 'What is it that you have to hand in today?' So focus on this, focus on this deadline so remember: OK, so you do have this activity, but it's doing today's so let's focus on this one now because that's what you need to do today. Don't get distracted and we're also meeting and having these synchronous moments with parents and children. So I met for example with a student from year nine last week and his mom and dad and I was trying to give him advice on how to focus because I said I sometimes I get distracted with my cell phone. So what is it that you can do not to get distracted with your cell phone? So we were talking about strategies on trying to deal dealing with things that get you distracted. So, I wanted to add this to this conversation.

Jessica: No, that's such a good point, I think we talk an awful lot about minimizing screen time and not being on our phones all the time and not being on the computer all the time, but now we're in a situation where we kind of have to be. And that that can be quite a challenge regardless of if you've got a diagnosis of an SEN or an additional need, that's challenging anyway. So I think that having a contact is really, really important in order to keep that that connection and that community feel of a school. Because that's partly what school is: a sense of community. And I wondered if any of you could maybe share with me any success stories? Any particular success stories, either of learners? Or of strategies that are really working to support your SEN learners at the moment?

Padma: Hello?

Jessica: Go ahead, Padma.

Padma: Before I share my success story, actually I wanted to ask Bianca regarding the buddy she was talking about. Is the buddy of the same grade level or who was the buddy to the child?

Bianca: OK, this buddy is an assistant that works for us, so he's hired. One of our colleagues and he works for Year Six to Year Nine, giving support to learners. So, he gets in touch with the teachers and organizes the routine. But we do have a class in the week when students have this tutor and they talk about different issues concerning learning or different aspects that they can talk about with someone. They can be heard by their teachers and we have emphasized that we can have these buddies. Another classmate who is doing well, teachers know they stick to routines, they're fast learners and they would be able to work as a buddy for another student in that same level. So we have been encouraging teachers to encourage their learners to act like buddies from year 7 to year 9.

Padma: Yeah, in the classroom bodies, yes, we also have that. Generally, when someone who's doing very well usually is a buddy to the other child. But here you have somebody also goes across stages. That's a very good point, I think, which we could use. Coming to success stories, Jessica. Yes, of course, I think I would like to share the example with my children with whom I'm working. I'm working with somebody who's still young. He's just about five years old. He's in Stage One going on to Stage Two. And then he has certain learning issues. He can read very well but can't comprehend. And then there are certain fine motor skill difficulties and attention. He's not able to sustain his attention generally. He was not in the regular class, so he was coming to my classes, but since the school closed down since two months, we've been having online class kind of since four or five weeks. I think now it's almost five weeks that I'm having a class with him. I would say it's a great success because all the other hassles of getting distracted that has come down. He has his parent beside him. And then, he's totally focused for the whole of 45 minute session. And we thoroughly enjoyed all throughout. And there's lots of learning happening. It has all the three aspects: we start off with a physical brain gym, then we have some cognition, enhancement activity, some pen and pencil activity. And then we also do a reading comprehension, which he does with a complete focus. It's such a huge change from what he was two months ago in a classroom, to in a remote classroom. So that's really wonderful with the little one.

Leena: I would like to add here that thanks to Padma and her team that we have continued with the remote learning for older children who are in the age group of 10 and 11 years and they are a group of six of them. And these classes happen twice a week. So there's a set timetable for them and there's a set schedule which is already with them prior to the classes so they're mentally prepared with what needs to be done. This is another, if I may call, a success story where it has worked very well with these children, because they're in the

comfort of their home, and they are able to work at their own pace. And also they do, appreciate the fact that they are able to see the teacher because these are, live classes which are happening. So there is, interaction. There is discussion there is lot of things which generally would happen in a normal classroom. But though it's not happening physically, it is true. In these live sessions there are one or two students in this particular group who are a bit conscious and they're always wondering whether they're being judged by others and also another child who has focusing issues. Since he's in the comfort of his room, he is able to focus better and turn in assignments at his own pace. So this thing which we have begun three weeks back has been working well, and I've been constantly maintaining that this has happened because of the support of the parents too. They have been very thankful that we have been able to support classes for these children and help them out. So that is something which I thought I can share.

Jessica: No, definitely, that's really useful, go ahead sorry

Bianca: I also have an example and I believe Teca does as well concerning tests, applying tests to students. So we've agreed in Middle School that we have both synchronous and asynchronous tests. Whenever it's an asynchronous test the teachers would be available in the link of the classroom, we're using Google classroom, so that students could ask questions and the teacher would be there for clarification. And for these two SEN learners in our Year Seven, they were going to have their English test which was going to be asynchronous. So we got in touch with them before the test and we agreed that the teacher would be available for them in the link of the classroom so that they could ask questions because we know it's easier for these young learners. In these two cases they're diagnosed with ADHD and we know it's much easier for them to talk and ask questions instead of writing the question on the classroom wall and so they did that. The teacher was also there, available to read the reading text to them so that they wouldn't get lost with the reading. And then right after the test, we got an email from one of the Moms, saying that her daughter finished the test, feeling that she had accomplished and that she had made it that and she was thanking us for all the support of this. And, when she left the moment of the test, she was smiling and happy and with the feeling that she had made it, and that that was really an example of a success for me that we experienced last week

Teca: And this was the same feedback we got from another family. The boy is in Year Four. And he has difficulty to read long test text and comprehend. So for the Portuguese test the teacher recorded herself reading the text for him, and then he had the chance to answer the questions from this reading with this kind of support. At the end he was super proud of himself because he could take the test without his mom or dad helping him. He felt that he could do that by himself and he was super proud. It was a very I think it's a success example as well.

Jessica: Thank you, those are all such lovely examples of ways that you're using the technology that's available, but in a way where the pedagogy and your teaching expertise is still the forefront. And I think that's something that I really like to draw out about. The fact that ultimately it's still about delivering those same teaching aims, it's just about adapting the practices slightly, and I wondered if anybody could share any strategies like what you've mentioned that you're potentially going to continue to use when you go back to the classroom? Would you continue to allow learners maybe to record themselves reading answers? Or will you continue to record test papers? Is this something that you maybe do going forward as we go back to the class?

Leena: Yes, I think as you have rightly pointed out, Jessica, it's we have learned to adapt with the current situation and thankfully it has started working well for us for the entire community: the teachers, the parents, the students. So going forward, yes we would definitely like to continue with the things which we have, initiated and which have worked well. Things like students recording their thoughts and if I say I want to sing a song, if he wants to do something recorded and send it to the teacher. Since we have different learning platforms, utilize them and basically give the assurance to the students that the teacher is available so he or she can post their feedback and their assignments at their own pace. So yes. I would want to continue with this kind of learning in future too.

Bianca: As for us here at Aubrick, at the beginning of the remote learning we got in touch with the families as Teca was saying at the beginning of this webinar and we did use some of the differentiations that we're using at the moment. We had to see how we were going to adjust what we did at school to remote learning. I think this was really a learning process for us. So we try to stick to using larger fonts and spacing, larger spacing between the lines, highlighting instruction verbs. So especially as I was talking to teachers, well now it's not black and white. It's on the screen so we can use the different colours to help them focus on what it is that they have to do. And break instructions into parts and use bullet points whenever possible. Record an audio of reading texts. I think this is something that we didn't used to do when we were at school, because then the teacher was there and maybe the teacher would give some support. But this is definitely something that we're taking back when we're at school because we can. For sure, and record an audio of a reading extract and then use that for the test. This too then the learner can be there, as Teca was saying, autonomously working on his own. He doesn't need the teachers to be there because sometimes they feel embarrassed having to raise their hands to call their teacher and ask for help during a test, especially when they're older in Year Eight or Nine they start having this feeling that no I can do it by myself. So if we offer more support and really make them see or be seeing that yes, they can do it by themselves. Offering extra time is something that we've always done, so we kept that in remote learning. Being online for a clarification to make sure that the teacher is there and they can talk to the teacher and reach the teacher in case they have any question. And offering the opportunity of choosing about two exercises to also record the answers so they can write the answer, but

they can also record an audio or record a video and send it to the teacher because they feel that they will give a proper answer to those questions. For example in a science exam for Year Eight, one of the questions was demanding students to write a detailed description of an experiment, and for this ADHD learner, we allowed her to draw a mind map. So on her test, so the teacher is not there to say we've made a different a different test in a way that spacing everything that I've mentioned before. So there was this test that was saved with her name and then the instructions also came along with the extra line with them, so you may also draw my map if you want. So I believe these are all things that we're going to take back to school.

Padma: When we started off with the quarantine we were adapting to the new technology from the regular school to this remote learning. We learned a lot of things and the best part is what we learned was the regular teaching was lacking certain things which the remote teaching has enabled us to do, and the children with difficulties in submitting their assignments. That has really worked wonders, so I guess once we go back to the regular classroom, we're going to continue using these methods of submitting the assignments. So that could be a videos or an audio, or the quiz forms which we have been using in remote learning. So that is the children are really getting the content. They're understanding the concepts very well. And the children who don't want to write lengthy answers for them. It's really working and they're able to focus and are motivated enough to learn. So I guess teaching will still happen, but I would like we will definitely have a few remote, online classes. Also, that's what I was telling Leena, that we should have out of three or four classes which we have in a week in the classroom. I guess I'm going to continue with me and myself. Our team. We are going to continue with at least one remote class during the week. So that would definitely help us help all the children.

Teca: And I'd like to add not a strategy, but I think we will go back to schools with a different mindset. We will think about teaching in a totally different way. I think we've been learning that we have many more possibilities which we had never dreamed of before, and I think we'll go back to school thinking differently. All of us teachers and coordinators, and even students. I think this experience, well it has been changing us deeply in in our teaching skills and our teaching. Now the way we think about teaching. I think we will be changed about that.

Bianca: I'd like to share something that the P.E. teacher said to a student last week. A student in Year Nine, she was, he's being proposing some exercises for students to do in a synchronous moment with him, and she sent him a message saying how embarrassed she felt having to keep her camera on. And then we schedule a meeting with her. The teacher, this student and I to talk and to listen to her. And she said I can, can my friend, one of my friends join? So sure. So there was another student that joined the conversation and I thought it was interesting; the teacher said, well, I didn't sign up for that but now I can consider: I'm an online teacher. I think that's what Becca said. It's the different mindset. We didn't sign up for that, but we've been learning a lot. And Padma was saying about the remote lessons and keeping one remote lesson here in Sao Paulo. We

have a very hectic routine and people live far from places where they work or where they attend. School traffic can be a big issue, even for teachers to attend staff meetings and definitely with the remote learning we can, now if we have a support lesson, if we've invited a student to attend a support lesson that takes place at a different time from his regular routine at school: well, now he can attend. At first he couldn't come to school because he would have to take a van and his mom would be working and there was no way he could be attending, because then he would have to attend his gymnastics or whatever it is that they're doing outside school. Now they can do it from home and it's OK. We accept that now we can do it now. We are online teachers. I think we can all do that.

Leena: Yeah, I didn't want to add to what Bianca said, something which I relate to. In my school we had this a challenge of, having classes for the primary students. Because our school does not work on Saturdays, we thought that Saturdays would be a good time to, spare an hour or so with these students, but it was a major challenge for us in getting the parents to drop the children off and then pick them up. So somehow that did not take off for all the students, but I think that once we started this kind of teaching the first thing which we discussed with each other was that 'hey now, It looks like it is happening that we can have classes for these students on days where they are at home and they can definitely spare an hour or so.' So this is one thing which we would be going forward with and ask them to spare one hour on days when they don't have school and, of course, plan something which they will look forward to and make the most of it. So this is one thing we definitely intend to go ahead with once we get back to our normal routine at school. So it just struck me when a Bianca spoke about it that this is definitely on our cards now.

Jessica: Definitely. I think it's so fascinating to think about, like what we've learned and how we've learned it, and the fact that this experience has proved that online or remote learning isn't lesser. It's a really valuable tool and I loved what you said, Teca about the fact that our mindset has changed. Our whole approach has changed and we've all become online teachers and kind of online learners from my perspective. We've all become learners, we've all had to adapt to these new challenges and these new ways of thinking. So, I think this is going to be my last question. I just wondered about, I spoke before about, how a school is a community, and, you've all talked really, really eloquently about fostering independence and really promoting like a sense of kind of ableism with kids about how they are able to access learning, that they're able to do the work themselves. But I just wondered about how you're looking after maybe the mental health of students as well? Maybe in a very explicit way or maybe in an implicit way? And maybe about the peer relationships? I know somebody mentioned about having a buddy system, but I wondered how you're maintaining maybe the mental health of students and the peer relationships of students as well within your schools?

Bianca: Well, I can start talking a little about how we've been dealing first of all, on an individual basis. We have this student from Year Seven who struggles with anxiety. I've been with her since she's in Year Four.

And, when we went to remote learning, the first thing I said was that we were thinking about her and when we were planning tests and assessments, I started thinking about her as well and then I got in touch with her mom to offer help and to tell her I was I was there for her anytime she needed to let me know. If her daughter needed to talk to me because sometimes that's what they need. They just need someone there to talk to them because, well, when we're at school they see us every time they *knock knock* on our doors. Whatever it is that they feel or if they want to talk about anything they come up to us and then now we're not there anymore. But I told them I'm here, I'm not there for you to *knock, knock* but I'm here on the other side of the screen so you can come up to me and try to reach me through my email. Some of them have had got my number because they take part in the service club so we have a service club Whatsapp group. So they do have my number. So, they've been reaching out on the phone and then I schedule a meeting to be here with them to talk to them, to give them advice. We do put on our website of the school some support for yoga practice that students, families can, access and do it at home from home with their kids. We have yoga, we have mindfulness practice. It's not much. It's once a week. Maybe we can increase that for even a more during the week because it's been working well, even though they're embarrassed having to be in front of the camera. But as I talked before about that, you are also an online learner now, so let's do it. We can do it together. So that's the way we've been trying to, keep our minds and also the teachers, healthy; sharing things about our routine and strategies they've been using during this lesson that they have once a week with their tutors where when they can be heard and when they can talk they share strategies. 'How is it that you've been dealing with this moment?' 'What is it that you have been doing too?' Apart from having to deal with a new routine? Well, but also dealing with not having your friends around you, so we've been having a connection with different schools around the world where they talk through Zoom and then they going to breakout rooms and then they talk about routines and to students from Peru from Brazil from Canada from the USA. They get together to talk about how they've been affected. Now with the Covid-19 and having to be away from their friends and then they see that they're all going through the same thing and keeping to their learning routine. They need to get in touch, even if it's through the screen, they need to get in touch with people, different people because we're all going through the same difficulties and sharing, hearing and being able to talk. I think that's how we're all going to go out from this healthier.

Padma: Let me add something over here, we have done the same thing. Similar things, something on the same lines. When our school has was closed, I mean, when we were locked down initially our team of counsellors, we made some people teach the parents in how to deal with lockdown how to talk to your children. What kind or routine would help? So this was all done initially and that helped that many parents have started doing that. But then what happened? I can give you an example. After four or five weeks of these classes, suddenly one day a parent communicated to me that her son is no longer wanting to do the assignments. He's kind of getting bored, he wants, and he's the only son, so they're all only the parents and the son, so the three of them are locked up in a room for so many days, and he's actually someone loves to

talk and he's a very articulate. He's somebody who's got very good verbal skills and loves to talk and say stories, connect and all that, so for such a person it was so difficult. So the parent was at a loss how to deal with him. And then, she connected, she talked, spoke to me and like Bianca shared, that you all have shared the phone numbers with the parents. In fact, our phone numbers are with the parents, so they are able to connect to us through the phone through emails and through Whatsapp a lot of the time. So they're connecting with their peer group, they're talking together with people and knowing that everyone is going through the same kind of situations helps us. Elders or children alike.

Jessica: Yeah definitely, definitely. I think that's really fascinating as well that you've made use of that kind of global connection. You've started to reach out across, not just within school or within schools within the region but schools globally. I think that's a really amazing use of the capabilities for digital technologies, and something that will continue and can continue as we move forward and as we transition back into school. So yeah, just a real positive. It all sounds incredibly positive ladies,

Padma: Can I? So the parents got back to us and the response was overwhelming. The number of videos, the number of pictures that we got from parents and students. So in fact we had a child who is in great to a baking cakes and her mother filmed a video of her baking, a cake, baking small cupcakes, and she shared it with us. We had a Grade Three child who gave tips, believe it or not, who gave tips to other children on these different ways of, keeping yourself occupied when you are in lockdown. The children were of course very, very enthusiastic to be a part of all this, and this was across all age groups. It was not only the little ones we had, even Sixth and Seventh graders. We had an Eighth grader who penned a beautiful poem on what it means to be in a room in times of lock down. So she shared it with us. So this was another way that we gave the students a form of expressing themselves. And these were uploaded in our website right, Leena?

Leena: Yes on the website and they were shared with the other parents too since their responses were quite many and it was not possible for us to cater to every response. We did share it with the parents of the same class so that they get to know what others are doing. So this was a good way of, giving the students an opportunity of expressing themselves and it actually turned out to be a kind of a motivation for them because when they saw their own friends doing something constructive or learning something, it actually worked as a morale with parent involvement and this was another way that we could, cater to this kind of an involvement. And this girl, little girl who baked cakes, actually she has reading difficulty. Remember she's a student who's definitely had a lot of difficulty with reading. But then you should see her video. How confidently she was showing how she made the cupcakes. It was really a good show on Facebook

Jessica: That was really, really interesting. I think that's something that keeps coming out of discussions like this, but other discussions as well that I'm hearing; it's almost providing opportunities for was to connect, and I know this word has come up a lot, but for us to *connect* almost in different ways and to share not just our

academic successes, and how we're academically supporting our learners or academically providing opportunities for development and attainment and achievement, but also it that *is* an achievement for her to bake cakes and for her to be confident to share that in a situation where maybe in school, if she's struggling with reading or feels challenged by that, then maybe that does impact her confidence. And I really love the fact that you've really thought about how you can foster those children's confidences in other ways. So it's wonderful. It's wonderful to hear. Thank you so much ladies for your time and for sharing all those strategies and interventions and all those kind of insights into what you're doing. We have a real global community of teachers, so I'm sure that there will be strategies that that they can take away from this. So thank you so much for your time and for sharing so openly and so honestly with me. I'm very, very grateful.