

Transition of Learners with Learning Disabilities from Primary to Secondary School Education in Umguza District, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT:

The study explored skills, challenges and trends in the transition of learners with learning disabilities from primary to secondary schools in Umguza District, Zimbabwe. A qualitative research approach that utilises the constructivist paradigm was adopted in this study. The target population was 85 staff members consisting of heads of primary and secondary schools hosting learners with learning disabilities, senior teachers and classroom teachers who taught form one and grade seven learners within the Khahlu cluster geographical area. Purposive sampling procedures were employed to select a sample of twelve (12) participants comprising four (4) heads of schools from four schools hosting learners with learning disabilities; that is two for primary and the other two for secondary schools, two (2) form one teachers, two (2) grade seven teachers and four (4) senior teachers. Interviews were used to collect data from the heads of schools and senior teachers while focus group discussion was conducted with teachers. Data were analysed thematically. The study established that there were no specific transition policies for learners with learning disabilities; hence most of them did not proceed from primary to secondary school education or those that did, hardly completed it. The study, therefore, recommends the development and implementation of relevant transition policies for learners with learning disabilities.

Keywords: Education, learning disability, primary school, secondary school education, transition of learners

1. INTRODUCTION

The transition of learners with disabilities from primary to secondary school usually creates a lot of anxiety and uncertainty in them (Ochieng and Murungi 2019). This is so because they will be expected to navigate through a myriad of adaptations related to new social and structural environments (Cumming, Strnadová and Danker 2020). Pitt et al. (2021) further elaborate that, such an experience can be perplexing and unnerving if concerned learners are not well supported with requisite resources. Given this,

Strnadová et al. (2016) observe that while other learners without disabilities may transit efficiently, the disabled ones may need considerate guidance to adjust to changes in curriculum and different pedagogy adopted at each educational level. Amongst learners affected by this process are those with varied learning disabilities.

In modern-day education, transition from primary to secondary school is associated with a

paradigm shift in several aspects that are fundamental in the entire academic journey of an individual. If these aspects are not given considerable recognition and attention, they are bound to hinder learners from successfully manoeuvring within the related process. Given this scenario, Mhlongo et al. (2023), observe that such transition introduces educational, organisational, social, cultural and geographical shifts, amongst others. The educational shift is observable when primary school graduate learners are eventually introduced to a more rigorous curriculum implemented in secondary school education. In this case, there is a need for those with learning disabilities, amongst others, to be equipped with relevant, sophisticated skills to meet the demands of such a curriculum. To elaborate on this further, Rendoth et al. (2024) posit that, adapting to this curriculum often poses challenges to the general population of learners, and making this, even more exaggerated to those with learning disabilities. Given this perspective, Elbeheri et al. (2023) argue that such learners often manage to meet the demands of the primary school curriculum because in most countries, there are more intervention programmes offered to assist learners with learning disabilities in primary than in secondary school. The expectation is that by the time they transit to secondary school, the associated learning challenges would have been minimised if not completely eradicated.

Another change that is experienced during the transition from primary to secondary school education and can affect the development of learners with learning disabilities, emanates from what Elbeheri et al. (2022) refer to as an organisational shift. Unlike in primary, in secondary school learners are taught various subjects by different teachers who subsequently have unique expectations that they would need to meet the needs of such learners. In addition, these subjects may be taught in different classrooms, implying regular movement from one class to another. Learners will be given learning materials for their subjects and expected to consistently bring these to relevant lessons. Generally, the secondary school organisation

demands more responsive action than the primary school one and this may be more challenging to learners with learning disabilities who also must manage their conditions. It is therefore, on the basis of this context that this study interrogates the skills and challenges experienced by learners with disabilities in the transition and the effectiveness of strategies adopted to ensure a smooth transition from primary to secondary education.

Furthermore, Trecene et al. (2021) highlight that learners who are transitioning to secondary school find themselves immersed in a new social world, where they are expected to understand a new set of rules and new school ethos. In addition to this, teachers at this level would communicate with them differently, to foster a sense of maturity. At the same time, as learners move to this new educational set-up, they may lose many or all their close friends from primary school. While this is noble, as it paves the way for the creation of more mature relations, it may, also adversely affect learners with learning disabilities who may also have limitations in adjusting to the order of new environments. It is also important to note that learners' transit to a new school environment, marks not only the building of a completely different layout, but their new school may be in an entirely different geographical location. They may have to learn new transport routes, travel alone and acquire a certain level of street safety awareness. All this may be a mammoth task for learners with learning disabilities and if not well attended to by relevant stakeholders, affected learners may even resort to dropping out of the entire education system.

Like in other countries, world over, in Zimbabwe, Umguza district, in particular, most learners with learning disabilities are afforded the right to primary school education like their counterparts without such conditions. For them to adapt successfully to the curriculum offered there, intervention programmes like, clinical remediation, Performance Lag Address Programme (PLAP) and Early Reading Initiative (ERI) are implemented (Mukoko & Mdlongwa, 2014). Nonetheless, researchers of this study noted that such services are not intensified at the

secondary school level because the expectation is that, upon primary school completion, all learners should have, at least mastered the basic skills of reading, arithmetic and writing. In this regard, when learners with learning disabilities graduate from primary school education and proceed to secondary school where there are limited intervention services to aid their learning, they often face several challenges that, in most cases, hinder academic growth. To highlight the drastic consequences of this further, Nkomo (2018) observes that, if students with learning disabilities fail to adapt to the demands of the new system at secondary school they may drop out and subsequently resort to socially unacceptable behaviours like drug abuse, promiscuity, robbery and theft, amongst others, for survival. If this situation remains inadequately attended to, the development of Umguza district, will be adversely affected. Such a scenario challenged the researchers to explore, in-depth, skills, setbacks and trends in the transition of learners with learning disabilities from primary to secondary schools of Umguza District, with the hope of identifying strategies that may be employed to enhance such a transition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many important transitions occur throughout each person's life, and many of them are associated with predictable life events, such as beginning preschool, leaving elementary school, and entering middle adulthood (Trecene et al. 2021). One of the most critical transition periods for learners with learning disabilities (LD) is the transition from school to young adulthood. The 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) defines transition services as coordinated activities that are designed within an outcomes-oriented process, that promotes movement from school to post-school, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living or community participation. Such services are normally based on the student's needs, considering their preferences and interests. According to Strand (2019), this concept is straightforward and simple, including

three major components. The first one is that every student and his or her family should be coached to think about post-high school goals and develop a plan for how to achieve those goals. Secondly, a high school experience should be designed so that the student acquires the skills and competencies necessary to obtain his or her desired post-high school goals. Finally, the linkages to post-high school services, support, and programs need to be identified and made before the student exits high school (Trecene 2021).

Whilst transition can be daunting for learners with learning disabilities there are several considerations that primary, and secondary schools as well as parents can make collaboratively to ease the related pressure. For instance, Plotner et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of learners' familiarity with the structure of the secondary school set-up before the actual transition occurs. This implies that towards the end of their primary school, primary school teachers may deliberately teach about the structure of the secondary school and its operations. Where possible, visits to nearby secondary schools may be arranged with concerned learners. Furthermore, assistance given to those with learning disabilities should be communicated as this helps parents and affected learners to make informed decisions. Also, Strand (2019) suggests that gathering information about the topics that will be studied during the learners' first term of their initial year at secondary school could be useful so that it will allow parents or caregivers to assist the affected learners even before more formal learning is introduced. Many schools now offer a transition week during the summer holidays, before the start of a new term. The children who participate in this occasion are availed great opportunity to establish the foundations of new friendships in their year group whilst getting to know their teachers.

In addition, families may devise ways to ensure that learners with learning disabilities maintain a good homework routine at the end of primary school as this will ease the transition to a bigger workload. Giving the child more opportunities to be responsible for their organisation, punctuality

and reliability will set them in good stead for the increased independence they will experience at the beginning of secondary school (Plotner et al. 2023). Furthermore, McCoy et al. (2020) state that practising how they might travel to school, by making the journey by themselves a few times before the start of term, could be useful for the learner to become familiar with their route and routine. On a different but important note, Hoy et al. (2018) highlight that parents should be prepared to see a change in their children as they start a new life at secondary school. In this regard, exposure to different interactions with children, and more mature conversations and topics, could influence a change in their attitudes and opinions. It may be surprising how quickly they change, so it remains noble for parents to figure out how to deal with these changes before they arise, as this may ensure a smooth shift not only into secondary school but into adolescence as well. Similarly, schools may assign the new secondary school children with a 'buddy' in an older year. This can be a helpful strategy to help the child feel at ease as they continue their education journey in a new set-up. However, care should be taken to ensure the right 'buddy' is identified, who possesses the desired moral standing and vision for impartation to the new secondary learner.

Several issues can hinder the successful transition of learners with learning disabilities from primary to secondary school (Mhlomo et al 2023). One of these is limited preparation by parents. This means that such learners cannot be highly expected to understand automatically the changes that will happen in their educational journey as they proceed to secondary school without being fully prepared to do so by their parents. According to Pitt et al. (2021), this can be done through holding intentional conversations about it. Further, parents can make efforts to deliberately learn and understand the processes of the new school, including going through the behaviour policies, and the schedules of the school day, and speaking to their child's new Head of the Year about what to expect. Some transition activities may include helping children with routines at home, such as creating checklists

for packing their bags each day. From a social perspective, they can connect with parents who are also sending their children to the same school and create opportunities for the children to interact. However, they should ensure that the friendship is not too dependent or else they may not try to make new friendships. Furthermore, parents should encourage resilience and remind the child that the change is open to the experience of all children. Reports of unhappiness or negative experiences should not be ignored, but responsible adults should encourage the child to find a solution to minor concerns where appropriate (Marshall et al. 2019).

Pitt et al. (2021) further observe that, this preparation would not be complete when done by parents only. This means that schools also have a role to play in this regard. Hoy et al. (2020) emphasise the need for the school to ensure that all communications are made timeously. If a transitioning learner has particular needs, the school's Special Education Needs department should contact the family and the school where the student is going before the start of the year or term to discuss the intervention plan. Another obstacle to a smooth transition to secondary school could be harsh or high expectations from the secondary school authorities. Secondary school teachers must try to build a positive rapport with new learners, keeping in mind that they are not yet familiar with the overall school culture. Whilst it can be a good idea to set expectations early by setting sanctions for organisational mishaps, such as bringing the wrong book to a lesson, praise should be given at every opportunity, more so than sanctions.

One other challenge faced by most learners with learning disabilities as they move to secondary school is bullying. Given this, most parents may resort to withdrawing their children with learning disabilities from schools in the first year due to bullying, name-calling, stigmatization and discrimination, amongst others which can potentially lead to further academic disruption for the child. Regarding this, de Wit (2023) advises that schools should have a robust anti-bullying policy in place, and deal with instances of bullying and discrimination before they are out

of control. Forlin, Sin and Maclean further allude to the fact that many children who have a negative experience in starting secondary school struggle to make friends or find their social circle.

Many studies in both developed and developing countries have examined issues related to the transition from primary to secondary school for all learners, that is, those with disabilities and those without (Jindal-Snape 2021). Given this, one of the common findings is that when learners with learning disabilities get to secondary school, their academic performance declines. This situation seems to be even worse for those who would have managed to adapt to the primary school curriculum through the help of remedial services (Jindal-Snape et al. 2021).

Furthermore, Pitt et al. (2021) reveal that learners with disabilities encounter challenges associated with creating meaningful relationships and managing their academic growth, amongst others. Similarly, Matruglio and Jones (2021) established that children with special educational needs experience problems with bullying, curriculum adaptation and general social adjustment. (Matruglio and Jones 2021). In the African context, Ochieng and Murungi (2019) recommended the government to deliberately consider promoting the right policy environment that encourages partnership with non-state actors who are key in promoting 100 per cent transition of learners with disabilities. The same view emerged from a study by Engelbrecht et al. (2022) in South Africa, which substantiated that there must be meaningful collaboration between primary and secondary schools' management systems aimed at removing barriers that may hinder successful transition between these sectors.

2. Methodology

Design

A qualitative research approach that utilises the constructivist paradigm was adopted in this study as it enables an in-depth exploration of issues and trends related to the transition of learners with disabilities from primary to secondary school. The methodological gathering of data was conducted through semi-structured face-to-face

interviews and focus group discussions. The chosen population consisted of 85 staff members consisting of heads of primary and secondary schools with learners with learning disabilities, senior teachers and classroom teachers within the Khahlu cluster.

Participants/Sample

Purposive sampling procedure was implemented to select a sample of twelve (12) participants, and these comprised of four (4) heads from the four selected schools, that is, two from primary and the other two from secondary schools. In addition, four (4) senior teachers and four (4) classroom teachers, constituting of two (2) form one teachers and two (2) grade seven teachers were included in the sample. These participants were selected based on their close interaction and vast knowledge on the transition of learners from primary to secondary school.

Heads of schools are responsible for enrolling learners, including those with disabilities and deploying resources, both human and material to support their learning. Primary school teachers are usually engaged in assessing as well as recommending learners believed to possess varied needs for professional diagnosis by specialists. On transition to secondary school, form one teachers contribute in inducting new students and monitoring their acculturation into the socio-political and academic life of the school. These individuals were also adjudged suitable candidates informed by their capacity and willingness to participate in in-depth interviews of the literate sample.

Instruments

Face-to-face interviews were used to collect data from the heads of schools and senior teachers while focus group discussions were conducted with teachers. The contextual questions in the interview guide focused on the skills needed for learner with disabilities to adapt to life at secondary schools, the challenges they experience and strategies that are available to ensure a smooth transition into secondary education. Similarly, the focus group discussion schedule contained related ideas, which were open for discussion by teachers.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study from the sampled schools was obtained from the district officer of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The researchers then made appointments with the interviewees through their respective heads of schools. The interviews were conducted in the offices of the participants, which proved appropriate for in-depth data collection on the phenomenon under study. Interviews with heads of schools and senior teachers were held during lunch breaks (12 noon to 1400 hrs) and focus group interviews were administered after school to avoid causing disruptions to school businesses. 20 minutes was set aside to collect data from face-to-face individual interviews and 60 minutes was designated for the gathering of data from focus group discussions.

An audio voice recorder was used to collect data in response to the permission that was granted by the participants. The audio recorder preserved the integrity of data while the recorded verbatim responses were used in data analysis (Knight, 2023).

Data Analysis

The gathered data were analysed thematically following an analysis framework proposed by

Braun and Clarke (2019). This framework was used to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within data (Dawadi 2020). The findings were presented guided by the research objectives and participants' recorded verbatim responses. Sub-themes were delineated within each main theme.

The analysis of data was also sensitive to the quality criteria for qualitative findings inclusive of aspects of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Flick 2022). The moral integrity of the research process was ensured through, among other things, protecting participants from harm, and assigning them codes for anonymity. Participants were coded as HSP (head of school, primary), HSS (head of school, secondary), STP (senior teacher, primary), STS (senior teacher, secondary), TP (teacher primary) and TS (teacher secondary).

3. Results

The findings of this study were reported based on the skills that learners with learning disabilities require to adapt to the secondary education curricula, the challenges they experience in the transition and the strategies that primary and secondary schools employ to facilitate a smooth transition from primary to secondary schools.

Table 1: Skills required for adaptation of learners with learning disabilities to the Secondary school curriculum

Theme 1	Sub-themes	Narrations from interviewees	Narrations for Focus Group interviewees
Skills learners with learning disabilities require for secondary school transition.	Practice of self-advocacy mentality	<i>"...form one learners usually appear timid and afraid to seek assistance from teachers and other students and lack confidence and assertiveness". HSS1</i>	
	Learners to engage deeply with curriculum content	<i>"Learners should be able to plan well, break down tasks into smaller steps and be organised as a strategy to accomplish more, even under strenuous conditions". HSS2</i> <i>"learners have to innovate to reduce the large volumes of study materials at secondary school</i>	

		<i>as a way to aid understanding and retention”</i> STS2	
	Development of social skills for learning	<i>“...change management intricacies ascend to prominence as the learner transits to higher learning settings”</i> HSP1	<i>“social skills developed at primary school should be improved if learners aspire to forge positive and profitable relationships at secondary school”</i> TS1

Table 1 reflects that participants of the study showed that learners with learning disabilities should be able to practice a self-advocacy mentality to adapt to the secondary school curriculum. They must actively seek needed support, express their needs and communicate effectively with both teachers and colleagues. This stance would help them to obtain accommodation, acceptance and the services that should be available to them. The tendency is that learners become afraid and reserved during their initial presence in a new environment, but this has the danger of perpetuating an undeserved lack of essential services and support when allowed to go on unchecked. HSS1 indicated that *“form one learners usually appear timid and afraid to seek assistance from teachers and other students and lack confidence and assertiveness”*. Learners need to develop strength and stamina to engage deeply with curriculum content and learning activities. They should show readiness to shift from the immature disposition to learning that is inherent at the primary level of study to assume a more responsible and responsive attitude to study. Learners must acclimatise to new ways of learning such as extended task completion time, the seating arrangements adopted at secondary school as well as how requests are made for learning needs and services. HSS2 added that *“learners should be able to plan well, break down tasks into smaller steps and be organised as a strategy to accomplish more, even under strenuous conditions”*.

The transition to secondary schools entails that learners should adopt effective study skills. They have to acquire study techniques tailored to their

learning style. These may relate to summarising, creating visual aids, or using devices as reminders for pending work. STS2 noted that *“learners have to innovate to reduce the large volumes of study materials at secondary school as a way to aid understanding and retention”*. TP1 concurred, highlighting that *“primary school content is limited and better comprehended compared to large volumes of secondary school stuff”*. Learners should also develop social skills for effective interactions at school. They must be able to converse with others, listen actively and understand social cues. In this regard, HSP2 observed that *“social skills developed at primary school should be improved if learners aspire to forge positive and profitable relationships at secondary school”*. Effective communication is vital for learners to express their needs, concerns, and feelings and to cope with stressful circumstances. They have to manage stress, anxiety and frustration that are part and parcel of teaching and learning at secondary school. TS1 said, *“possession of effective communication skills is imperative because that would give learners confidence to approach appropriate offices and individuals in cases of need”*. The participants in the study revealed that learners have to think flexibly. They need the ability to adapt to changes in their educational journey. This change usually comes with how they handle unexpected situations, and fluid relationships and decide on alternative approaches to solving diverse social and learning nature. HSP1 revealed that *“such change management intricacies are less prominent in primary school but ascend to prominence as the learner transits to higher learning settings”*. Further, learners must adapt to the situation where they must consistently set goals, be they short or long-run and then set the stage

to progressively achieve them as they lead towards terminal examinations.

Table 2: Challenges faced by learners with learning disabilities in the transition to secondary school education

Theme 1	Sub-themes	Narrations from interviewees	Narrations for Focus Group interviewees
Challenges faced by learners with learning disabilities in the transition to secondary school education	Experience of feelings of uncertainty and anxiety	“...learners are anxious because they are unfamiliar to the place...” STS2 “...the signs of anxiety are detected at the early stages of primary education, but then also emerge strongly on preparation to exit primary schooling” STP1	
	One-size-fits-all approach is usually used	“...secondary type of education requires responsive learners, those that show intellectual maturity to secure their understanding of concepts” SHS1	“...learners have to ensure they commit to realising their independent academic growth” TS1

The study showed, as mirrored in Table 2, that learners with disabilities experience feelings of uncertainty and anxiety in the new secondary learning environment. Such feelings can result in educational implosion. This may impact their social and academic performance, which are valuable ends in their school exploits. STS2 said that “*learners are anxious because they are unfamiliar to the place, they are unsure where to go to find what and worry about how to grapple with the new curricula*”. In this regard, STP1 added that “*the signs of anxiety are detected at the early stages of primary education, systematically depreciate towards upper classes, but then also emerge strongly on preparation to exit primary schooling*”. This anxiety has a knock-on effect on adaptation and performance in the new secondary school curricula. Participants indicated that primary education values individualised instruction, which is delivered with a bias towards the kind of teaching that is sensitive to individual needs. There is an increased focus on adaptation,

accommodation and multi-stakeholder participation to enhance learner achievement. This is different at secondary school, where a one-size-fits-all approach is usually used. Teaching takes the form of a whole-class approach and teachers proceed in an assessment-oriented instruction with ‘*willing-learners*’. SHS1 affirmed this view, with the words “*secondary type of education requires responsive learners, those that show intellectual maturity to secure their understanding of concepts*”. Secondary school education requires learners to be change agents. They have to play an active role in their education. This is unlike in primary education where teachers and parents assume central functions in leveraging the academic trajectory of learners. TS1 observed that “*learners have to ensure they commit to realising their independent academic growth*”. They can do this by setting realistic goals that are achievable through exerting sustained and focused efforts in their study.

Table 3: Strategies employed to ensure a smooth transition of learners with learning disabilities

Theme 1	Sub-themes	Narrations from interviewees	Narrations for Focus Group interviewees
Strategies employed to ensure a smooth transition of learners with learning disabilities	Establishment of mutual social intercourse between primary and secondary school learners	<i>"It must be the norm to invite the secondary school community, including learners and teachers so that learners can appreciate each other and foster the spirit of family"</i> HSP1	<i>"...discussion regarding the transition of learners with learning disabilities to secondary school is not negotiable considering the inevitability of the process".</i> TS2
	Support transitions by offering pastoral and academic care systems	<i>"...learners need to be supported and cared for throughout the year, this nurtures them within the school culture, and ethos and shields them from bullying and possible abuse"</i> STS1	<i>"The meetings and associated activities assist learners to adjust to the new learning environment and to welcome families into the school community".</i> TP2
	Involve parents in the education of their children with learning disabilities	<i>"Parents have to teach their children about, among other issues, relational problems, choice of friends, indulging in illicit drugs and delinquency".</i> STS1	<i>"...helps young learners to develop positive attitudes towards school, diminishes stress levels..."</i> TP1

The findings of this study revealed that primary, and secondary schools and parents should play a role in facilitating a seamless transition of learners with disabilities from primary to secondary school (refer, to Table 3). Primary school authorities need to arrange intentional visits to secondary schools by learners before the start of the academic year. Inversely, they can invite secondary school learners to primary school. The aim would be to ensure the establishment of mutual social intercourse between learners from the two levels of education. This view was corroborated by a statement from HSP1, who said *"It must be the norm to invite the secondary school community, including learners and teachers so that learners can appreciate each other and foster the spirit of family"*. This may help to smooth out the transition of primary school learners to secondary school. The families of primary school learners with disabilities may also be invited during such visits to trigger the development of strong partnerships among key stakeholders in the education of learners. Parents and their children might also take advantage of these organised visits to initiate

enrolment processes for existing primary school learners. The school authorities may further be called upon to support families with the enrolment documentation required for secondary education. The opportunity can also work to communicate to parents the issues related to the transition of learners to a higher education context. This would trigger debate about the preparedness of learners that are candidates for the changeover. TS2 supported this view, by stating that *"discussion regarding the transition of learners with learning disabilities to secondary school is not negotiable considering the inevitability of the process"*. The discussions should hinge on issues such as anxiety, fear, frustrations, excitement and curriculum adaptations that are linked to the transition. Secondary schools should be aware of the peculiarity of the learning and emotional needs of learners with disabilities. Learners need to be prepared for the anticipated social and emotional changes, shifts in friendships, available support at secondary, the quest for independence and to cope with difficult situations.

The study revealed that secondary schools can support successful transitions by offering pastoral and academic care systems. This must constitute a package of a code of care and responsibility for learners with learning disabilities. Pastoral care involves rendering support to learners throughout the entire first year of study. This was confirmed by HSS1, who said *“Form one learners need to be supported and cared for throughout the year, this nurtures them within the school culture, and ethos and shields them from bullying and possible abuse”*. This is especially critical for learners with disabilities, who normally experience intimidation and discrimination, and need to be provided with specialised equipment and resources. Secondary schools are expected to usher in new learners by implementing communication and orientation systems. These assist learners and parents to familiarise themselves with the school environment, staff and school services. Parents and teachers need to organise contact meetings early in the first term to build relationships and share expectations related to the stay and academic progress of learners. TP2 underscored the point that *“the meetings and associated activities assist learners to adjust to the new learning environment and to welcome families into the school community”*.

Parents of learners with learning disabilities are expected to play an important part in the tripartite alliance, involving primary, and secondary schools and themselves. The shift to secondary education comes with the turbulence of the adolescence stage. This is the stage where learners experience drastic turns in behaviour and therefore attracting the support of parents. It is at this stage that learners are prone to experimentation, which in essence, exposes them to all sorts of dangers for the youth. STS1 said *“Parents have to teach their children about, among other issues, relational problems, choice of friends, indulging in illicit drugs and delinquency”*. However, it is common for parental involvement to decline as children progress through their schooling, despite strong evidence supporting the necessity of their continued engagement to influence student success at secondary school. Some parents reduce the extent of their involvement because they feel

incapacitated to support adequately their children with the more demanding secondary school curricula. This at times, may be misinterpreted as disinterest in the education of their children.

The study showed that parents can offer consistent support to the education of their children with learning disabilities through active participation in organised school activities, monitoring their learning progress, and regular attendance at school conferences. This tends to indicate to learners that their parents love and care about them and their education. TP1 observed that the involvement of parents *“helps young learners to develop positive attitudes towards school, diminishes stress levels and equips them with competencies to better manage a myriad of challenges associated with the transition to secondary education”*. The educational aspirations that parents have for their children have a massive effect on the efficacy perceptions of learners. Educated parents tend to desire and motivate their children to do well at school. This is a welcome factor, which can complement the efforts of secondary school personnel to breed favourable learner academic outcomes.

4. Discussion

This study explored the hassles characterising the transition of learners with learning disabilities from primary to secondary education. This inevitable transition is critical and complex, usually marked by increased anxiety and uncertainty (Ochieng & Murungi, 2019). The constructivist qualitative approach, leveraging Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977), is pivotal in highlighting the importance and influence of different ecological sub-systems on learners, particularly those with special needs (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). The learners are at the centre of the theory, influenced by the nested interconnected environmental systems, from the microsystem to the broad cultural context of the macrosystem (Perera, 2023). The close interaction between the family and the child in the microsystem may help to boost the educational attainment of learners. In the same understanding, the formal and informal social structures of the mesosystem can indirectly shape the readiness of learners, including those with

disabilities to cope with challenges of transiting from primary to secondary education. In the same breath, the cultural ideologies, attitudes and social conditions in which children are submerged, play a part in determining the kind of acceptance and support for inclusion in the new secondary school life (Perera, 2023). This environmental shift witnessed as learners transit to secondary school, is synonymous with the chronosystem. In the main entirety of Bronfenbrenner's system including the exosystem, and macrosystem contribute to successful leader adjustment as enrol into secondary schools.

Absence of specific transition policies for learners with disabilities is one significant finding, which leads to poor academic outcomes and dropout rates (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021). This aligns with Pitt et al. (2021), who argues that learners with disabilities require effective guidance to adapt to new educational demands. This study underlines that while primary education might offer tailored support; this is not the case with secondary, which often lacks adequate intervention programmes, thereby exposing learners with disabilities to a more rigorous and less accommodating curriculum (Elbeheri et al., 2023). Learners with disabilities also experience social and emotional challenges (Trecene et al. 2021) as entrance into the new social landscape can be daunting to them. Learners may feel anxious and uncertain owing to unfamiliar settings and social dynamics (Mhlongo et al., 2023). This inadequate preparation and the high expectations of secondary education can further exacerbate feelings of insufficiency (Pitt et al., 2021).

Consequently, this study captured essential skills needed for successful adaptation, such as effective communication, organisational strategies and self-advocacy (Plotner et al., 2023). Such skills are critical for navigating the increasingly independent learning environment of secondary education, where learners are required to manage multiple subjects taught by different teachers (Elbeheri et al., 2022). In order to ease this transition, several strategies may be adopted, inclusive of enhancing parental

involvement, developing individualised transition plans, and fostering collaboration between primary and secondary education institutions (Trecene et al., 2021). These recommendations are pivotal in creating supportive educational ecosystems that recognise and accommodate the unique needs of learners with disabilities.

5. Conclusion

To crave a seamless and productive transition of learners with disabilities, there is need to forge a vibrant tripartite alliance among primary, secondary schools and parents or guardians. This desired partnership should pave way for pastoral and academic support systems to be established to realise successful transitions for learners with disabilities. Educational leaders at secondary schools need to create an environment that fosters a sense of belonging and community for learners to fit-in and receive instruction that takes cognisance of their assets and needs. This study contends that, the transition journey should start early, well-ahead of actual shift of learners to form one, say a year to allow fear and anxiety to fade before resumption of studies.

This study recommends that schools should begin to prepare learners with learning disabilities for transition well on time before the actual shift time commences. This may be a year before transitioning and can include sessions involving an exchange of critical information regarding learner assets and needs. Secondary school authorities should help new learners with learning disabilities to develop positive relationships with people around them, who may include teachers, other staff members and their peers. This fosters a sense of belonging and community which learners with learning disabilities desperately need to engage critically with curricula content and resources. Learners with learning disabilities need to be within a caring family for support, and this is especially urgent for such learners in boarding institutions. Learners with learning disabilities have to be encouraged to work collaboratively with others in mixed-ability groups to tackle small, rich and achievable tasks. This would boost the development of a goal-attainment mentality in them, which is catalytic for building stamina to

deal with even more demanding future tasks. Teachers should also adopt teaching approaches that are sensitive to the needs and interests of learners. The content of the study must relate to the experiences of such learners so that they find value in participation and own the ensuing discourses. Individualised transition plans stand to be preferred in the transition of learners with learning disabilities. These should specify

strategies, adaptations, accommodations, and support services needed for such learners. In all efforts, parents need to assume central roles in helping their children navigate the ragged academic terrain. Secondary school authorities should create regular platforms for dialogue with parents through scheduling meetings, conferences, school visits and other functions to build a strong school community.

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