Supporting EAL/D students returning to school after learning from home

As students return to school after learning from home, teachers must consider the particular needs of EAL/D students, many of whom were impacted by cultural, linguistic and technological barriers during periods of lockdown. Schools should prepare to meet these students' immediate practical, social and emotional, and language learning needs as they return to school. A number of key considerations are described below to support EAL/D students returning to school.

Points to consider when planning support for EAL/D students:

Some English language learners experienced additional learning from home challenges including access to learning content, limited modelling of English language, learning on unfamiliar online platforms and additional home responsibilities. While students' opportunity to learn in English at school was limited, their learning at home may have been supported with families using home languages.

Students, particularly those from a refugee background and who have experienced trauma, may have developed feelings of anxiety during the lockdown period and may continue to feel anxious about the transition to school. Students may also feel that they have lost learning opportunities and that they have fallen behind in their learning.

Due to the disruption of lockdown, students may need to be reacquainted with school routines, school rules and learning expectations, and reminded of materials and equipment they are required to bring to school. Students should also be informed of changes to routine and new procedures such as physical distancing and hygiene practices.

Supporting newly arrived EAL/D students

Newly arrived students who enrolled during a period of lockdown will require support to feel safe and welcomed in a new physical learning environment, to develop a sense of belonging and to build connections within the school community. This can be facilitated through:

- support in establishing relationships (with teachers, support staff, classmates)
- an orientation to the school to introduce them to important people and places in the school, and to explain school rules to them
- engagement with their families/carers to explain school processes and procedures, to navigate any changes that have occurred, to engage them in their children's learning and to support that learning at home through their home language

- establishing a clear structure to the school day, maintaining consistent routines, and preparing students so they know what to expect
- organising and delivering intensive English support to eligible newly arrived students. Implementing intensive English support is a top priority as students will require this targeted language instruction in order to interact socially and participate in learning experiences
- assessment of English language proficiency in order to determine students' current needs and to plan for appropriate language supports and instructional next steps

Schools with newly arrived students from a refugee background may wish to use The Welcome Program resource to create an online orientation program.

Newly arrived students who enrolled shortly before a period of lockdown will require similar support to:
- re-establish relationships with their teachers and classmates
- reconnect with the school
- regain a school structure and sense of routine
- promptly recommence their intensive language instruction through targeted intensive English support
- determine if they have developed gaps or misconceptions in content areas during the learning from home period by assessing and planning support accordingly

Enhancing support for EAL/D students

A school environment offers EAL/D students the opportunity to learn English, to learn learning skills and curriculum content through English, and to learn to control the registers of the English language according to purpose and audience. Language is essential for learning, but while learning from home, EAL/D students' exposure to appropriate models of authentic language occurring in real time, access to consistent and appropriate levels of planned and contingent scaffolding, and opportunities to practise and develop their language skills in a variety of social and academic contexts may have been significantly reduced.

With a return to school, teachers can support their EAL/D students by:
- identifying the gaps created by the differences in the social purposes for using language while learning from home (e.g. mostly instructional language was used) and the language of the curriculum (e.g. persuasion, explanation, etc.) and creating opportunities for students to learn and practise these to bridge the gaps
- ensuring that the language students are expected to produce is scaffolded through controlled, guided and independent learning opportunities
- providing message abundancy through the use of visuals and diagrams supported by spoken and written texts
- modelling register through spoken and written text examples
- providing more collaborative and communicative learning tasks so students have opportunities to hear and use appropriate language in real contexts

- increasing opportunities for interaction in learning, for example, by incorporating 'talking to learn' tasks in pair or group work so that students are learning to develop 'literate talk'
- using translanguaging pedagogies where possible

Creating a positive environment for learning

Creating a safe and comfortable learning environment and implementing strategies that support student wellbeing are essential to setting the foundations for learning. The S.T.A.R.S framework, developed by UNICEF, is an effective model for successful settlement and learning. To support EAL/D students returning to school, schools are encouraged to refer to the S.T.A.R.S model to create optimal conditions for learning. The five elements of the framework are described below:

Safety: Feeling safe is important. Ensuring students are aware of the processes that have been put in place to help keep them safe should be a priority. Encouraging students to use hand sanitiser or wearing a mask are small steps that can help students to feel safe. For students who are anxious about returning to school, a social story may support them in understanding what school will be like and who they can go to for support. Being honest and encouraging, rather than simply reassuring, can help older students.

Trust: Trust is about being consistent and building a professional relationship with students and their families. Students returning to school may feel as though they have been let down and it is important for teachers to foster or re-establish the sense of trust that comes from being at school and being a member of a school community.

Attachment: Teaching students to have an attachment back to the school will be important. Re-establishing or developing school routines, expectations in the classroom and getting back to study and revision is required. For some students, learning from home may have been more enjoyable than learning at school and vice versa. Re-establishing attachment to school may take time.

Responsibility: Supporting students to take responsibility for their learning and actions is important. For example, teaching students to take responsibility for their own actions including looking after and wearing masks, ensuring they clean their hands with sanitiser and bringing the correct materials for school. Older students can be encouraged to develop personal responsibility by maintaining their school diaries, being consistent in their homework routines and setting short-term learning goals.

Skills: Once students feel safe, have built trusting relationships, are re-attached to school and feel responsible for their learning, then they will be ready to focus on school learning. Students will be ready to be active learners and re-engage with classwork.

For more information

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