

# Planning

## Supporting students' diverse needs

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**The support teachers provide is crucial to ensure that all students have the opportunity to engage in learning in safe, supportive and well-managed learning environments. Students may require varying supports depending on their strengths and needs. This practice guide is part of a suite of resources developed in partnership with MultiLit and the Institute of Special Educators to help teachers refine or refresh their understanding and practice of supporting students with diverse needs.**

Not all students who require additional support will have a diagnosis of disability or a health condition, and some students may have a combination of needs. Teachers and school leaders must reasonably support all students to access and participate in education. This may require making reasonable adjustments to the learning environment, teaching or the curriculum in collaboration with students and parents/primary caregivers, specialist and support staff, and medical and allied health professionals.<sup>1</sup>

This practice guide will support you to create a safe and inclusive learning environment for students with diverse needs through effective planning. This will help ensure these students can access and participate effectively in learning on the same basis as their peers. The guide has been designed to complement, not replace, existing school and system policies, procedures and guidance.

Students may require varied support with emotional regulation or social interactions, or may have physical, communication or sensory differences. This means that some students may require:

- support accessing the curriculum on the same basis as their peers
- support to identify and understand how they are feeling, and to manage and safely express their emotions, such as excitement, frustration, anxiety or anger, in a constructive way.

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<sup>1</sup> Alice Springs [Mparntwe] Education Declaration, 2020; Disability Discrimination Act 1992; 2020 Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005, 2021.

- adjustments to the environment to address the influence that specific sensory stimuli (such as noise, light, touch or smells) may have on student learning or behaviour
- support in social situations to interact successfully with adults and peers
- support for physical needs such as accessing the learning content, the classroom or equipment
- support in understanding or processing information that is received through listening, reading or other forms of input such as non-verbal cues
- support in expressing their needs, preferences and ideas through verbal or non-verbal communication
- support to achieve and maintain a regulated state for learning and participation
- support for personal care and health needs
- support to assist with their acquisition and use of Standard Australian English at school.

Adjustments to support students' diverse needs should be collaboratively planned in advance and regularly reviewed. Teachers should identify students' preferences, strengths and needs and make reasonable adjustments with input from the students, parents/primary caregivers, support staff and in-school and external professionals. Be mindful of students' privacy and comfort in any discussions you have with and about them.

## Practices to support planning

This guide outlines the following practices to support planning for students' diverse needs:

- Identify students' preferences, strengths and needs.
- Identify learning objectives based on students' needs.
- Identify and organise supports and reasonable adjustments.
- Monitor and review students' progress to celebrate success and inform planning.

It is also important to consider how you collaborate with students' support networks and support students' communication needs, emotional regulation, physical needs, sensory differences or social interactions.

Planning support for students' diverse needs is strengthened when:

- positive, collaborative connections and relationships with students and their support networks are established and maintained
- culturally safe and inclusive learning environments are created
- all students are taught and encouraged to understand and support each other's strengths and differences.

Always display calm, consistent and well-managed emotions and behaviour. This models safe emotional expression and behaviours and helps to create a supportive learning environment.

## Identify students' preferences, strengths and needs

It is important to identify students' preferences, strengths and needs to inform the plan for whole-class and individual goals, supports and adjustments for students with diverse needs.

Use the information provided by students, parents/primary caregivers and any professionals supporting students (e.g., special educator, school counsellor, psychologist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, speech pathologist) to assist you to plan further assessments and make in-class and in-school adjustments.

Parents/primary caregivers are likely to have information that they would like to share with you about their child's strengths, specific needs and adjustments that work for them. Organise accessible meetings to discuss the needs of their child. In a secondary setting, this may be undertaken by one staff member who supports that student (e.g., year coordinator, homeroom teacher, student support specialist), with information then disseminated to relevant classroom teachers.

To identify students' strengths and needs through consultation:

- Ask students, where appropriate, and their parents/primary caregivers about:
  - resources or supports that their family uses that they would recommend teachers incorporate into the student's learning experience
  - anything teachers should know about that affects the student's learning at school
  - the student's likes and dislikes, both in and out of school
  - achievements or successes the student has experienced at home or elsewhere outside of school
  - supports or adjustments implemented by other teachers that have been beneficial to the student
  - activities or tasks that the student finds particularly challenging or frustrating, and what has helped in these situations
  - anything else they think the teacher should know to better support the student's strengths and needs.
- With parent/primary caregiver permission, review medical and allied health reports on file and request information from external professionals in relation to students' strengths and needs.

## Understand students' behaviour to identify preferences, strengths and needs

Implementing consistent classroom [expectations](#), [rules](#) and [routines](#) supports all students. However, students who experience difficulties with [emotional regulation](#), [social interactions](#) and [sensory differences](#) may require further support to understand, manage and safely express their emotions so they can successfully engage in learning and maintain positive connections with peers and adults.

Behaviours that stop students from successfully engaging in learning and interacting with peers and adults need to be understood in relation to the behaviours' function. For example, students may engage in disruptive behaviour to avoid tasks they dislike or are unable to complete, to gain attention or approval from peers or teachers, to communicate a need they are otherwise having difficulty expressing, or when they are experiencing strong emotions. Recognise that students may be incapable of responding to verbal or non-verbal directions when they are experiencing strong emotions. They may have reduced comprehension and difficulty expressing themselves, and their responses may not be intentional.

Understanding the function that behaviours serve and why students may be behaving in certain ways can assist teachers in determining the best way to support the students.

To identify and respond to behaviours that require support and planning:

- Assess which in-class routines are successful and what interactions are always positive. Consider successful interactions when planning adjustments and interventions.
- Plan to implement some simple strategies to address any low-level behaviours, such as talking out of turn. For more persistent and escalated behaviours, such as aggression, seek guidance from school leaders on how you can plan to prioritise safety and seek assistance when incidents occur. You should also collaborate with school leaders and support staff on further assessment and planning of support for these behaviours in future.
- Consider completing an Antecedent, Behaviour and Consequence (ABC) behaviour analysis to inform planning. This analysis may be helpful to identify situations where students find it difficult to regulate their emotions, as well as situations where they cope well.
- Provide content at the appropriate level for students and use effective teaching methods to ensure students can access the content and progress towards mastery. Sometimes students experience difficulties with emotional regulation if the instruction has not been adapted to meet their needs.

Behaviours may serve the function of obtaining or avoiding something, such as sensory input, attention or an object or activity. Working with others to identify the function of a behaviour using an ABC chart may help in selecting effective supports.

First, identify the behaviours that are impacting students' learning or social connections (e.g., calling out, wandering around the classroom, refusing to complete learning tasks, verbal aggression such as swearing, or physical aggression towards staff or students).

Second, respond to the behaviours as appropriate, and then record them as instances in a chart that includes details of the behaviour itself, the lesson, learning task or activity, the date and time, and anything that occurs immediately before or after the behaviour, such as peer or adult interaction. Where possible, seek additional support for recording observational data in the chart. If this isn't available, record the data as soon as possible after the incident, noting this may have to be after a lesson has finished.

Note you may need to collect multiple ABC scenarios with clear and detailed information before you begin hypothesising the function of a behaviour and selecting appropriate supports.

**Table 1:** Sample ABC Chart

| Antecedent   | Behaviour  | Consequence   | Possible function   |
|--|--|---|---|
| <b>What happened before the behaviour?</b>               | <b>What was the challenging behaviour?</b>                             | <b>What were the events that followed the behaviour?</b>                              | <b>What is the student likely to be trying to obtain or avoid with this behaviour? (e.g., attention, an object, an activity, sensory input)</b> |
| Students were working independently on a maths question. | A student threw their book across the room and shouted 'I hate maths.' | The teacher told them to go to the quiet area. One of their peers picked up the book. | To escape from a feeling of frustration during a difficult or non-preferred task.   |

After completing the ABC chart, review the observational data and look for patterns.

- » Does the behaviour happen at a particular time or during a specific activity (e.g., afternoons or when reading)?
- » Are there specific times or activities when the behaviour does not happen (e.g., never in group work)?
- » What happens before and after the behaviour, and are there any patterns (e.g., reprimand by teacher, laughed at by peers)?

You might discuss the results of the analysis with students and parents/primary caregivers and seek guidance from a specialist teacher or allied health professional to better understand the information collected and what it might mean. Provide students with time and support to process and communicate in these conversations, as some may find it hard to communicate what led to a situation where they experienced difficulty regulating their emotions.

Use the information gathered to select appropriate supports. For example, you can work with the student to create a step-by-step guide for what they do to prepare for the task and teach them how to respectfully gain the attention of adults and their peers.

## Understand students' use of assistive technology to identify preferences, strengths and needs

- Identify the strengths and needs of your students who use, or may benefit from using, assistive devices or adaptive equipment.
- Familiarise yourself with students' assistive devices or adaptive equipment and how they are used by consulting students, parents/primary caregivers, support staff and external professionals. Equipment used to support students with physical and communication differences may help with:
  - communication – augmentative and alternative communication devices, hearing aids, text-to-speech or speech-to-text software, translation apps, digital recorders, tablets with communication apps, picture or alphabet communication using books, boards or digital devices, or wearable communication devices
  - writing – pencil grips, slant boards, tablets, number factors charts or calculators
  - mobility – wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, crutches, standing frames
  - computer access – alternative keyboards, mouse alternatives, voice-recognition software
  - being in the classroom – adjustable desks and chairs, noise-cancelling headphones, adjustable lighting.
- Use the assessment information provided by professionals who may have recommended the assistive device or technology to review and plan for the use of the equipment in classroom and school settings. For example:
  - Consider and plan for when and how students will access the assistive device or technology.
  - Consider and plan for where assistive technology devices will be stored and how they will be maintained.
  - Consider the extent to which the assistive communication device or technology effectively supports students' communication in the classroom or school setting. For example, can the students point, touch or interact with device and do you need to plan to improve this? Does the device or technology effectively support students' communication needs, such as their vision and hearing, and do you need to plan to improve this?
  - Consider whether students can move around the classroom or other school settings using the equipment. For example, can they move smoothly and safely in all school settings and do you need to plan to improve this? Can they easily manipulate the equipment they are using and do you need to plan to improve this?
- Monitor the students' use of assistive technologies to help plan adjustments and encourage further practice.

## Assess literacy and numeracy skills to identify preferences, strengths and needs

Reading, writing and numeracy are necessary skills for accessing curriculum content and demonstrating mastery of that content. Screening for literacy and numeracy skills during the early years of school is important for identifying students who may need varied support to develop these skills and for planning how this support will be provided. Some students enter secondary school without basic literacy and numeracy skills.

It is important to provide access to academic content in all subject areas for students who have not yet achieved functional literacy skills (see the Identify and organise supports and reasonable adjustments section), but developing literacy and numeracy skills will improve employment and other opportunities post-school. Screening of students' reading, writing and numeracy skills and using this screening data to plan for students' support requires whole-school systems and processes. Teachers can work with school leaders to initiate screening to identify students requiring literacy and numeracy support and plan support interventions.

## Set learning objectives based on students' needs

For some students who require additional support, environmental adjustments and quality teaching practice may be all that is needed for students to fully participate in classroom instruction. For other students, learning objectives relating to emotional regulation and emotional expression might be needed to support students' participation and engagement. Some students may additionally need individual academic and social objectives. All objectives should be set in consultation with students, where appropriate, and parents/primary caregivers. These objectives should be documented in an individual plan, which includes strategies, supports and a possible timeline for when these objectives are reviewed.

To set learning objectives based on students' needs:

- Set academic objectives that are informed by assessment of students' current skills or knowledge and the next skill or knowledge in the curriculum continuum.
- Set social objectives that are informed by assessments of students' current emotional regulation and social interactions and the next skill to help them strengthen these.
- Ensure that students' objectives are specific, achievable, measurable and functional, and add value to the students' learning experience. Students' objectives can be stated as single observable skills. For example, an objective for using a break card to indicate that a break is needed could be written as '[Name] will hold up [measurable skill] a break card for the teacher to see [how well] every time he needs a break [how often]'. The teacher might want the students to be able to follow directions in a variety of situations. One objective representing a skill that is a component of following adult directions might be written as '[Name] will sit down in his seat [measurable behaviour] within one minute of an adult requesting [how well] to "Sit in your seat, please" [using this cue]'.

When planning whole-class instruction, consider students' learning objectives, current skills, and knowledge to plan opportunities for them to practise and develop their skills.

## Identify and organise supports and reasonable adjustments

Teachers need to plan and review adjustments as part of daily, weekly, term and yearly planning and programming so that all students can engage and participate in teaching and learning activities. Strategies selected should have a strong research base. All strategies and supports should leverage students' strengths and interests where appropriate. This may include alternative strategies or additional time for students to master a new skill or knowledge.

Supports for students should help them access and participate effectively in learning. It may be appropriate to decrease use of the support over time.

To help plan supports and reasonable adjustments, teachers need to:

- Plan to establish, teach and maintain classroom expectations, routines and rules to create safe and supportive learning environments for all students, and assist students to demonstrate expected behaviours.
- Make any necessary changes to the learning environment or equipment with the support of the students, parents/primary caregivers and relevant allied health professionals.
- Identify strategies to meet students' communication needs.
- Identify strategies to assist students to self-regulate their emotions and manage their social responses.
- Identify strategies to support students' physical and sensory differences.
- Plan for students' safe movement around the classroom and other school settings (e.g., specialist rooms, hall, playground and sporting facilities).
- Consider seating arrangements that support engagement and positive behaviour. Avoid environmental factors (such as excessive noise, visual clutter or lack of personal space) that might increase anxiety or negatively impact students' sensory experiences.
- Plan to explicitly teach numeracy and literacy across the curriculum to support students' learning needs, as identified through screening and assessment.
- Plan to support students who have difficulties with reading and writing to access written material via alternative means. Discuss with students how best to support them in ways they are comfortable with. Students need to be explicitly taught or supported to use any assistive technologies so that they can use them with success and independence. You may need to plan for the inclusion of multiple modes of presentation such as audio books, text-to-speech technology and visual supports such as diagrams and flow charts.
- Plan to support students who have yet to develop writing skills or who have physical differences that make handwriting challenging by providing them with ways to demonstrate their learning. These could include the use of diagrams, oral rather than written presentations, speech-to-text technology and computer technology.
- Ask parents/primary caregivers (and students, if appropriate) to let you know of planned student absences for treatment, therapy or rehabilitation. This allows you to adjust your schedule if possible, plan to cover missed content at another time and consider arrangements for learning tasks to be sent home for completion.

## Monitor and review students' progress to celebrate success and inform planning

Monitoring student progress is important as it helps inform changes to students' learning objectives and supports.

To accurately monitor and review student progress and inform planning:

- Gather assessment data and information from discussions with students, parents/primary caregivers and other professionals. Review and revise students' objectives, the steps to achieving the objectives and/or the students' instructional arrangements when required. For example, if a student's objective is to respectfully initiate contact with peers, and a specific skill (a component of that objective) is to ask to join in an activity using words, pictures or symbols, record each opportunity the student has to ask to join a game or activity and record whether the student asked to join, and whether the attempt was successful.

**Table 2:** Sample record of student progress for an objective

| Opportunity date/time | Activity/game | Location   | Asked to join yes/no | Communication mode | Did the communication work? |
|-----------------------|---------------|------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
| 9.30am                | Word bingo    | Classroom  | Yes                  | Sign               | Yes                         |
| 11.00am               | Handball      | Playground | No                   | n/a                | No                          |

- Plan how to use current information from ongoing assessment when reporting to parents/primary caregivers and in-school and external professionals supporting the students, and seek feedback.
- Celebrate and recognise the achievements of students and share successes with parents/primary caregivers and other teachers and professionals contributing to their plan for supports and adjustments.

## Reflection questions

- Are there any areas of your knowledge or skills that you would like to address through professional learning to plan effectively for supporting students with diverse needs in your classroom?  
Why do you believe these skills are important?
- How have you carefully assessed the students' strengths and needs as a basis for planning a program?
- How have you collaboratively established measurable and achievable learning objectives based on the students' needs?
- How have you planned suitable supports and made reasonable adjustments to support student learning?
- How have you systematically monitored and reviewed student progress to celebrate success and inform planning?

## Further reading

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