



Chapter 7

Beyond School — Exit Pathways, Opportunities and Outcomes

Curriculum Guide for Special Schools

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Beyond School – Exit Pathways, Opportunities and Outcomes

7.1 Preparation for Adult Life

Helping students prepare for their adult lives is a major part of the work of staff in special schools. In many ways, the secondary phase of education in special schools might appropriately provide a curriculum for transition into life beyond school. Firstly, the integration of the elements of life planning education²⁹ into different aspects of learning experiences throughout primary and secondary phases of education provides a good foundation for life planning education for students' further development. Secondly, in the senior secondary phase, learning experiences from, for example, Other Learning Experiences (OLE), courses in Applied Learning/adapted Applied Learning and sex education, could form an integral part of a coherent curriculum for transition. Curriculum leaders in special schools should be prepared systematically to explore the possibility that the curriculum should be extended and adapted in order to help students make smooth transitions into their adult lives.

It is suggested that effective planning for transitions into adult life will need to start during the upper primary phase, continue through to the completion of the senior secondary phase, and follow students into post-school provision. Through the later years of schooling, therefore, staff in special schools should provide a wide range of options for students with different needs, interests and career/life aspirations. In developing strategies for life planning education, staff should place emphasis on the use of learning time, including time outside lessons and learning experiences and activities beyond the classroom.

Students should be actively involved in life planning education. Students in special schools should be encouraged to explore their own preferences, interests and aspirations, and be enabled to develop capacities for self-reflection, the expression of choices and decision making. Students will be more able to have clear goals and aspirations for their adult lives, when they are provided with opportunities to explore, understand, make choices and prepare for their adulthood.

²⁹ For details of the components and implementation of life planning education, please refer to Part 6 of the *Guide on Life Planning Education and Career Guidance for Secondary Schools (2nd Edition)* and the *Framework of Implementation Strategies on Life Planning Education for Primary Schools*.

Moreover, all students should be empowered to make choices on the basis of their experiences, available options and their preferences. The process of planning transitions into adult life for students leaving special schools should also take full account of the views and expectations of parents, carers and other family members. This requires collaborative, holistic and personalised ways of working throughout the secondary phase of special schooling, with staff pursuing a multi-disciplinary approach to transition planning. Greater co-operation and collaboration with the agencies responsible for making provision for young adults with special educational needs and/or disabilities could also be strengthened, so that more appropriate transition services would be provided for students.



For reflection and action

- What measures has your school adopted to help students understand their personal strengths and difficulties, develop aspirations for their future and prepare for their adult lives?
- How does your school work with parents, family members and community to build social networks around students in preparation for their lives beyond school?

The exploration of more opportunities that enable students in special schools to fulfil their potential is accompanied by an ongoing need for professional development, networking and support for staff in the special schools in order that their practices keep pace with new initiatives. Practitioners in special education should commit to constantly enhancing their skills and developing their professional vision. Other stakeholders, such as families and students themselves also need help to recognise and embrace the realistic and relevant adult life opportunities that are being made available. This entails exemplifying, for parents and other stakeholders, vocational, occupational, residential and educational opportunities in their local neighbourhoods available for students leaving special schools.

In order to pursue possibilities like these, staff in the special schools should, in partnership with parents:

- help them be fully aware of the current exit pathways available to students leaving special schools with particular needs and attainments
- explore the potential for developing a focus on transitions to adulthood in the curriculum in the secondary phase of schooling, including opportunities to develop aspects such as

education for life planning, social relationships and interaction, community participation, and the role of information and communication technologies in contemporary life

- promote participatory approaches to transition planning for students in special schools
- explore opportunities (including vocational, educational and other aspects of adult life) of post-school provision for students leaving special school to promote choice, foster well-being and enhance quality of life

In addition, making connections between the school and other stakeholders in the community helps build powerful social networks around students and enhance their quality of life in adulthood. In a number of areas of preparation for adult life, enhanced communication and collaboration is therefore required between staff in special schools and other agencies in order to develop:

- appropriate curriculum materials
- innovative strategies for learning and teaching
- shared approaches to individual case work and support



For reflection and action

- What strategies are used in your school to raise awareness among staff, students, families and other stakeholders about post-school options?
- What contacts and connections do you have with professionals from other agencies who will be responsible for the exit pathways that your students will follow after school? How do these contacts and connections influence your work in school?

7.2 Applied Learning and Vocational Preparation

With the implementation of the New Academic Structure since 2009, like the Applied Learning courses offered for students in ordinary schools, the adapted Applied Learning courses have been provided as senior secondary elective subjects which help students with intellectual disability having different aspirations and abilities articulate multiple pathways. The purpose of these courses is to provide them with work-related experiential learning in simulated or authentic contexts to develop career-related generic skills, values and attitudes, as well as to help them explore their career aspirations and orientation for lifelong learning, rather than to provide prevocational training for specific types or forms of employment.

In recent years, there has been an increase in the provision of vocational or career-oriented courses that are tailored specifically for students leaving special schools to help enhance their vocational skills for future employment. Students will benefit from a range of these courses that address both vocational and wider developmental and educational priorities, and the important learning that has taken place in the secondary phase of education could then be continued.

7.3 Continuous and Further Learning

Learning should be regarded as a lifelong process. Teachers should set high expectations and sustain positive aspirations for the ongoing development of their students as they leave special schools. Post-school further or continuous learning opportunities, which are founded upon school-based attainments, can take forward aspects of learning with origins in the school curriculum and orientate towards vocational preparation and adult life. Some students following the ordinary curriculum in special schools may pursue further study at tertiary institutes/other organisations. For other students leaving special schools, some post-school provisions may need to focus on meaningful work/learning experiences, preparation for community participation and enhancement of quality of life. In addition to facilitating students' vocational exploration and preparation, special schools should focus on further fostering of students' personal growth and social development to help them be better prepared to cope with new opportunities in different aspects of adult life.

In sum, preparation for exit pathways and adult life options for students leaving special schools in future should promote a broader focus on quality of adult life, encompassing, for example, choices about purposeful day time activities, leisure pursuits, social life, domestic independence and ongoing learning.

7.4 Whole-person Development, Well-being and Quality of Life

In order to optimise the curriculum for the future for students in special schools, it will be important to foster whole-person development while recognising a diversity of needs, interests and aspirations. As Chapter 3 “Addressing Specific Learning Elements of the Curriculum” has demonstrated, the curriculum in all schools should encompass elements beyond basic skills and subject learning. Teaching the whole student should mean fostering a range of aspects of development including:

- physical development
- academic or intellectual development

- emotional development
- psychological development
- social development
- sexual development
- ethical, moral and spiritual development
- citizenship development
- aesthetic development
- vocational development

Looking beyond school to adult life, it will be apparent that these aspects of development will underpin well-being and quality of life for young people and adults with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Standard measures of well-being tend to emphasise access to material resources, including jobs and earning, income, wealth and housing. But the social, emotional and psychological aspects of well-being should also be considered. Therefore, acknowledging that well-being can be both individual and collective, planning for life beyond school should also focus on health, education, security, life satisfaction, social connections, the shared environment and quality of life.

Staff in special schools should recognise that these and other aspects of well-being are enhanced when students:

- are engaged in stimulating and fulfilling activities
- find fulfilment and enjoyment in their lives
- participate in activities and experiences that promote challenge, development and growth

Satisfaction, well-being and quality of life depend upon enrichment and cannot flourish where there is stagnation. The most commonly recognised domains in quality of life³⁰ for adults in the general population are often identified as involving:

- psychological well-being and personal satisfaction
- social relationships and interaction
- employment
- physical and material well-being
- self-determination, autonomy and personal choice

³⁰ There are a variety of quality of life domains identified by different scholars or organisations, for example, Hughes et al. (1995), Schalock et al. (2002), and the OECD (2019). Teachers may refer to related references for more details.

These domains may equally apply to students leaving special schools. However, they may need to be adapted to suit those students' needs. For example, for some young people with significant special educational needs and/or disabilities:

- personal satisfaction may require advocacy and even direct support from family members, carers or other professionals
- social relationships and interactions may need to be facilitated within specially designed community-based activities
- employment may be taken to include any form of meaningful, fulfilling and productive occupation
- material well-being may require financial support
- physical well-being may depend upon the provision of ongoing care and support
- self-determination may be enacted through social and familial networks and co-agency along with individual initiative

Therefore, fostering quality of life for people with disabilities may entail the focus on both professional interventions and outcomes that are valued by individual people themselves. While sets of quality of life indicators can be used as reference for holistic planning of the whole-person development and well-being of students with special educational needs, staff in special schools should provide learning opportunities that will equip students with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes they need to live a quality life.

For many students leaving special schools, quality of life in adulthood could be greatly enhanced by the provision of ample opportunities in the curriculum to express themselves, make choices and explore and develop their use of leisure time. School staff should therefore set high expectations of their students in these areas, and at the same time, continue to communicate and collaborate with other stakeholders to explore potential choices for exit pathways and adult life for their students, so that the well-being and quality of life of these young people will be enhanced continuously.



For reflection and action

- How does your school involve students in planning their own future, enabling them to reflect on their achievements and express their hopes, dreams and aspirations for their adult lives?
- How does your school maintain contact and communicate with different organisations and outside agencies in order to understand the lives of students outside and beyond school?
- How can your school help students adapt to the changes that adult life will bring?