Communicating Mild Intellectual Disability

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Abstract

 A key assumption with respect to Intellectual Disability (ID) and special needs education is that principals understand the programming and criteria for specialized school sites that focus on employability education for the mild intellectually disabled. A flaw with this assumption is evident due to a gap in understanding amongst many principals surrounding the benefits of both inclusion and specialized sites; a students academic, intellectual and adaptive function and how these interact; and employability education. Principals have also expressed a need for concrete communication strategies that are coherent, supportive and empathetic and that will allow them to effectively guide parents and students towards the special education programming students may require. This paper outlines the key points of each of these issues and how they influence each other. The paper culminates in adapting the CONSOLE (Tan, Pang and Kang, 2019) communication framework in order to provide principals with a tool to address this need.

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Communicating Mild Intellectual Disability

Recently I was assigned a new leadership position as Inclusive Learning Department Head at my school. When notified I was excited and eager to get started and make a difference in the lives of my special need’s students. I had been a teacher at this school for the past three years but would now be engaged in a role that is critical to its employability focus. My previous teaching and leadership assignments had been a mix of vocational construction classes and work experience education so I felt prepared because I had learned many valuable lessons with respect to employability education within a special needs context. I was also fortunate to have been involved in many partnerships with outside stakeholders and other school leaders while in my previous leadership role as Career Pathways Curriculum Coordinator, so I had some opportunities to communicate my schools’ purpose and mission to principals, teachers, parents and businesspeople.

Before my education career I worked in the skilled trades as both a Red Seal carpenter and a journeyperson Piledriver and Bridgeworker. My experience as a tradesperson and industry leader has given me a real world perspective on what the end goal may be for many special education students. It also lends me a hard won credibility with colleagues, parents and stakeholders which has been invaluable in accomplishing my school’s mandate of serving students with mild intellectual disabilities. This mission is focused on employability skills, functional numeracy and literacy and student independence.

Because all students within my school are identified as having special needs we are described as a Specialized site. This designation means that we have specific enrollment criteria centered around a student's diagnosis of mild intellectual disability, a full scale IQ score between fifty and seventy-five, adaptive behaviour in the mild range, and a score below the tenth percentile in at least 2 core academic areas. Because my school division mainly prescribes the inclusive learning model where special needs students are included within mainstream classrooms, my school is very unique and has often been described as a “hidden gem”, due to its low profile and lack of promotion within its school division. Despite the lack of recognition, my school is acknowledged by those who know it as having exemplary outcomes with respect to meeting the vocational and academic needs of students with mild intellectual disability.

Students with mild intellectual disability struggle with poor cognitive function, impaired motor skills and coordination, and extended individual developmental stages (Bala & Novak, 1991). While studies have shown that students with intellectual disabilities can achieve higher vocational and academic results when included within mainstream schools (De Vroey, Struyf, & Petry, 2016), there are many benefits to a specialized site over an inclusive one. Smaller class sizes, more specialized staff, and more supportive overall school culture can have a positive effect on student success particularly when individual student needs are carefully considered and communicated (Sharma, Dunay, & Dely, 2018).

My leadership role is to evaluate potential students to ensure they meet entrance criteria, facilitate psychological assessments, apply for coding-based funding for students that require it, and most importantly communicate to parents, stakeholders and district leaders our employability focus within our special needs context. However, It has become apparent that facilitating communication of employability education to principals, parents and outside stakeholders will be much more difficult than I had originally anticipated. Despite clear criteria many students are being recommended to my school that only partially meet or do not meet the criteria at all. I am finding that many parents of new students are confused as to what employability education is and are often extremely sensitive during frank conversations regarding the options available to their special needs child. Often, parents exhibit unrealistic expectations of their child’s potential and are unwilling to accept the fact that college and university education will most likely not be options for their child. They also lack an understanding of how employability education differs from mainstream academic programming and how student adaptive, intellectual and academic functioning influence the ultimate potential of their child. Many students who come to our school are misplaced, ill-informed and unprepared for the level of independence needed to be successful within our context. A great number are used to one-on-one educational support and struggle to adapt, and some are on the autistic spectrum or come from behaviour programs which require altogether different supports and programming than what is recommended for mild intellectual disabled students. The most surprising or glaring aspect of intaking students has been a lack of information and education available to school principals within my division regarding special education employability training for students with a mild intellectual disability and how Specialized sites can potentially fulfill that role. It is essential that principals in my division are equipped with the communication tools and information they need to guide special needs students and their families towards the educational program that best suits the students’ needs.

The stakes are high. Students with intellectual disability often struggle after leaving school with finding and maintaining employment and living independently (Newman et al., 2011; Sanford et al., 2011). Effective collaboration between educators, stakeholders and parents is a key contributor to the independence of intellectually disabled students once they leave the supportive confines of the school system (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009; Newman et al., 2011). If clear communication of employability education for students with mild intellectual disability cannot be achieved, then students may be misplaced within a school division and be cheated of the chance of reaching their full potential and realize their employability and independence once they leave school. Furthermore, valuable resources could be misappropriated towards students that do not meet criteria and would be better served within a more suitable program.

My assumptions center around the idea that a students’ intellectual, adaptive and academic levels can be used to ensure that effective programming is implemented in order to allow a student to reach their full potential. My goal is to align my experiences in vocational education and the world of work with research in the areas of special education, educational leadership and communication in order to more clearly outline the connections between mild intellectual disability and employability education. This research could then be used to provide school leaders with the tools they must have in order to better serve their special needs students through the clear and accurate communication of programming pathways and the explanation of the strengths and struggles of students with mild intellectual disability. It is the knowledge of what an intellectual disability means, the real limitations of impared cognitive function, and how a students adaptive behaviour and academic levels work together to form a students’ unique learning needs that must be communicated to parents and students in an honest and respectful way. Principals understand their schools’ culture, they know their students and their families and they have the leadership skills required to address this challenge. What is needed however, is a concrete communication strategy supported in research that allows principals to most effectively guide students and parents through these often difficult conversations and student transitions.

In speaking with these partners it is abundantly clear that this work is badly needed and with respect to my research on this subject this is a clear advantage because there is an appetite amongst stakeholders for assistance in this area. Many principals and parents have expressed confusion as to why certain students with mild cognitive disability fit employability education criteria and why others have not. Most have stressed that clear information and guidelines would eliminate frustration and allow principals and parents to focus their energy and time towards programming that is the best option for their students and children. Ultimately clear communication is required. Applying a communication framework, along with research from educational psychology and vocational education, I will address this problem and provide insight and tools that will give school leaders a greater understanding of the issues pertaining to students with intellectual disability and the ability to navigate through these complex and sensitive issues.

Because students enroll in our specialized site from other schools within the division, it is imperative that this communication strategy is targeted and focused in order to be effective. It is also essential that this strategy takes into account the sensitive nature of these parent conversations and incorporates empathetic and supportive approaches. Principals are the gatekeepers of their schools and function as the key link in the communication chain (Lipsky1980). They are therefore in the best position to relay information to students, parents and teachers. Research demonstrates that principals who understand the importance of communicating with parents are most successful in helping students reach their full potential (Constantino, 2016). The purpose of this paper is to outline the key issues surrounding employability education for students with mild intellectual disability, and to establish a clear communication strategy based on Tan, Pang and Kang’s (2019) CONSOLE framework that principals can utilize in order to better serve the special needs students within their respective schools.

**Review of the Literature**

 My review of the literature will begin with a clear definition of intellectual disability and how academic, adaptive and intellectual functioning are used to diagnose students and provide strategic programming both within a specialized site or an inclusive environment. Assumptions around the perception of academic success will be addressed and how functional academics support the development of key employability competencies that are particularly important in a special educational context.

This research will address issues surrounding both inclusive and non-inclusive approaches to special education and how employability outcomes are achieved within a specialized site. Warnock, Norwich, and Terzi’s (2010) evaluation of inclusivity and its strengths and limitations will be discussed in regards to how specialized sites can be effective options especially with respect to employability education and how this type of programming can be effectively communicated to parents and students

Employability and vocational education for students with special needs will be discussed and research surrounding the effects of employability education will be examined. School-to-work programs will be reviewed through the lens of the needs of students with mild intellectual disabilities. Research regarding societal acceptance and support for disabled workers, and the benefits of employment and the self-sufficiency of the intellectually disabled will be reviewed.

 Finally I will provide an exploration of communication theory and the CONSOLE (Tan, Pang, Kang, 2019) communication framework, and how these tools can be used to guide our thinking and practice of principal communication of employability education for mild intellectually disabled students. These theories and frameworks will be the basis for communication recommendations made at the end of this paper of strategies and key implications around the communication of employability education of intellectually disabled students.

**Definition of Mild Intellectual Disability**

In diagnosing students with Intellectual Disability (ID), The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed,; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) is used primarily within education and by researchers alike for classifying mental disorders. Despite criticism regarding its reliability and sometimes vague description of some mental disorders. (Kirk et al., 2013; Mallett, 2014; Spitzer, Endicott, & Williams, 2012). The DSM-5 clearly describes intellectual disability as “deficits in general mental abilities (Criterion A) and impairment in everyday adaptive functioning, in comparison to an individual’s age-, gender-, and socioculturally matched peers (Criterion B). Onset is during the developmental period (Criterion C)” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013 p. 37). While the diagnosis of intellectual disability has evolved over the past half century what has remained constant is the correlation between a child’s adaptive behaviour and intellectual functioning (Tassé, Luckasson, & Schalock, 2016). What is also certain is that the research demonstrates that employability of intellectually disabled students can be accurately predicted based on the level of employability programming provided in schools (Park, & Bouck, 2018). This connection to the research is critical and must be understood by teachers, parents, stakeholders and for the purpose of this paper; school principals.This link is borne out in the research conducted by the Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society (2011) and its assertion that students with intellectual disabilities require stable, targeted programming that correlates with their intellectual and adaptive level in order to ensure the best chances of employment beyond school.

 At the heart of this research is the struggle that principals must somehow communicate these important aspects of mild intellectual disability in an empathetic, yet clear and honest way. The strategies applied by the principal must allow parents of every level of emotional and cognitive ability to fully understand the information, they must not devalue the child, and should support positive steps to meeting the students’ educational needs through sound, empathetic and educated decision making.

**Intellectual and Academic Function**

Psychologists must utilize specialized clinical training and professional judgement in order to evaluate test results and assess a child’s intellectual function (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Problem solving, critical thinking, judgement, cognitive efficacy and practical understanding are all critical aspects of intellectual function that are evaluated (2013). The general result of the intellectual assessment is a child’s full scale IQ score. A child diagnosed with mild intellectual disability will score a full scale IQ between fifty and seventy-five. This score is important because it determines a childs’ level of intellectual function, or cognitive ceiling. Intellectual function is an important aspect of employability education because a students’ ability to problem solve, critical think and apply good judgement directly correlates to employability competencies (Alberta Education, 2020). Students with an IQ score in the mildly disabled range require adapted or modified academic programming in addition to vocational classes that focus on the trade skills associated with on-the-job work requirements (McLoughlin, 2018). A study conducted in the United States by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991) indicated that basic foundational academic skills such as functional numeracy and literacy were essential to the employment success of intellectually disabled students. This makes it clear that the academic and intellectual programming for mildly intellectually disabled students is critical and must be thoughtfully planned at the level of the students cognitive functioning.

**Adaptive Function**

The adaptive behaviour of a child is one of the key aspects of mild intellectual disability (AAIDD, 2010). Adaptive function refers to a child’s ability to respond to the activities of daily life related to social engagement, independence, and communication, within the home, school and outside world ((5th ed,; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is the adaptive level of the child that determines how much support a child requires (2013). In the mild range a child's regulation of emotion, maturity, perception of social risk and social judgement are all limited when compared to children of the same age (2013). Research shows that students in the mild range tend to exhibit greater disruptive behaviour like; opposition to authority, manipulation and temper tantrums, than children in the more severe range ((Einfeld & Tonge 1996; Molteno, Molteno, Finchilescu & Dawes, 2001). These types of behaviour can seriously limit the ability of a mild intellectually disabled child to function within a work environment where socially acceptable behaviour is considered a job requirement. It is imperative that specific programme interventions, adaptations and modifications are in place in order to assist students with mild intellectual disability to inhibit negative behaviours particularly within the practical or adaptive domain (Gligorović & Buha Ðurović, 2014). These interventions should not only be centered around emotional intelligence through the provision of a supportive social context where students feel able to utilize self-regulation and advocacy skills and link these concepts in order to develop adaptive behaviors (Izard 2002; Izard et al. 2008), but also within a cognitively appropriate program where academic expectations are matched carefully with the intellectual ability of the student (Adibsereshki, Shaydaei, & Movallali, 2016). These assertions emphasize the connection between intellectual and adaptive function and the importance of understanding how one influences the other.

When considering the needs of a mild intellectually disabled student, both the academic and intellectual function (IQ) of the child are considered in relation to the child’s adaptive (behavior) deficits. A student may function at a high intellectual level but requires significant behavioural support, or may struggle academically but present socially as highly functional. It is these individual student intricacies that can further muddy the water when parents view their childs’ abilities or educational potential. This is because weaknesses in one area can be misconstrued or overlooked because of strengths in another. It is a principals’ responsibility, in collaboration with teachers and psychologists, to untangle these pieces and ensure parents understand their childs’ overall level of functioning, and what programs are available to meet the needs of their child.

**Inclusivity Versus Specialized Sites**

Inclusive models of education have been adopted and supported by many educational authorities around the world (Forlin, 2010; Monsen et al., 2014; Paliokosta & Blandford, 2010; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015). The Standards for Special Education in Alberta, Canada states that “educating students with special education needs in inclusive settings is the first placement option to be considered by school boards. Inclusion [refers to] specially designed

instruction and support for students with special education needs in regular classrooms and

neighbourhood schools” (Alberta Learning, 2004).

Advocates for inclusive education have generally asserted that the human rights of the child is the primary argument for inclusion (Ruijs, & Peetsma, (2009). Farrell (2000) however, stresses that the most important right of every child is a good education that meets the needs of the child. In order to address academic, adaptive and intellectual needs of a child with a mild intellectual disability most of these students are included within mainstream, regular classrooms often with additional support and adapted or modified programming. This modified or adapted approach can often confuse or irritate some inclusive advocates because students who require additional support are often pulled out of their inclusive classrooms which is the antithesis of the definition of inclusivity (Garry Hornby, 2011).

Another key argument for inclusive schools is the feeling of belonging and that there is a place for every child and every ability (Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; Kunc, 1992; Schnorr, 1997). Daunt (1993) asserts that inclusion benefits society as a whole because it supports tolerance and promotes this idea of respect for diversity and culture.

Some researchers have argued that inclusion is not working in education and that specialized sites should be considered and in fact promoted in order to give students and parents the right to choose the best educational approach for them (Warnock, Norwich & Terzi, 2010; Farrell, 2000). There is also significant anxiety within many teachers surrounding their feelings of inadequacy and responsibility in providing effective education for students with special needs within a mainstream context (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Belzile, 2008; De Vroey et al., 2016; Hwang & Evans, 2011; Santoli, Sachs, Romey, & McClurg, 2008; Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2001). In fact Warnock (2010) goes on to propose that inclusion is not necessarily the best option for the intellectually disabled. In a study completed by Rogers and Thiery’s (2003) intellectually disabled students in an inclusive American classroom actually showed a significant decrease in reading growth. Furthermore these students were found to prefer the specialized, non-inclusive class (2003). For students of all disabilities belonging and having educational needs met seems to be less about place and more about feeling a part of a community (Goodall, 2018).

The benefits of a specialized site where mild intellectually disabled students can be a part of a culture and belong to an alike community allows for many advantages. Whole school planning, school culture and school-wide targeted, scaffolded and sequential programming that is focused on employability are among the many benefits for students. As explained earlier in this paper these benefits and key understandings regarding special education, employability and specialized sites are often difficult to explain to parents and stakeholders. Communicating these student-centered, specialized site benefits for mild intellectually disabled students is critical and often the ethical responsibility of the school principal. This key leadership understanding is emphasized through the competency “communicating a philosophy of education that is student-centred…” in Alberta’s Leadership Competencies through LQS#3 Embodying Visionary Leadership (Alberta Government, 2018, p. 5). From a special education point of view this clearly emphasizes that individual student needs can be addressed in many ways and that both inclusion and specialized sites both have valid applications in meeting those needs if we are to maintain a student first approach to education.

**Employability and Vocational Education For the Intellectually Disabled**

 Given the cognitive impairment of students with mild intellectual disability academia or post-secondary education is a difficult, one might say, impossible dream unless there is drastic societal change. In the absence of the option of a university degree the goal unquestionably becomes employment in the area of traditional vocational jobs like entry level food preparation, labour jobs and skilled and semi-skilled trades. The main purpose of vocational education for students with mild intellectual disabilities is to teach them the skills required to become employable, gain some independence and lead a fulfilling life later in adulthood (Walls & Fuiimer, 1997). Research by Ruthkowski et al. (2006) shows a direct link between vocational training of students with disabilities and greater employment opportunities. In the 2006 study students surveyed were up to nine times more likely to become employed than students of similar disabilities who were not exposed to vocational and employability education. Research has also demonstrated the ability of these programs to provide sustainable employment opportunities for ID students that go beyond high school and into adulthood (Neubert & Moon, 2006; Rogers, Lavin, Tran, Gantenbein, & Sharpe, 2008). Since work is an essential aspect of adult life and the purpose of school is to prepare students for adulthood studies like these lend heavy credence to a targeted vocational program supported by functional academics and adaptive skill enhancement (Beyer, Meek, & Davies, 2016).

 There are many established school-to-work initiatives being implemented around the world that focus on the transition of disabled students to employment. Hollenbeck (1996) asserts that these programs can be broken down into three separate functions. Primarily, a school-to-work program gives a student an experience where they can build both employability skills and bolster their resume. This can be through an authentic job placement or a replicated work experience. Secondly, school-to-work programs allow for valuable collaboration with industry and business that enables communication of job opportunities and partnerships that can benefit both employers and students. Lastly, school-to-work transitions can assist schools in providing specific job skills and certifications that may lay outside of the curriculum.

In Alberta, Canada, these school-to-work programs can take many shapes. Work Experience, Work Study, Career Internship and Registered Apprenticeship are all widely used and “provide the opportunity for students to apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes from coursework to real-life situations through a school-community partnership arrangement” (Alberta Education, 2019, p. 9). Within a specialized site focused on students with mild intellectual disabilities these programs require adaptations and modifications but there are significant gaps in the research as to how this can be done to meet the cognitive abilities of ID students as there is clearly a focus within this field of employability education for mainstream students with normal cognitive function. Studies that do apply to the focus of this paper show that most programs are focused on adaptive skills like independence and social awareness then on specific job skills needed to acquire and keep employment for the long-term (Bouck, 2010; Shogren & Plotner, 2012; Zhang, Zhang, Ivester, & Katsiyannis, 2005). Research by Berry et al; (2013) however, does demonstrate that a specialized site would be better equipped to address both the adaptive and vocational skills required to fully prepare ID students to work in an inclusive world outside of school because specialized sites are better suited to provide these students with confidence and self-esteem due to their ability to program for levelled academics and practical vocational skill development across all subjects and grade levels.

 Another aspect of employability education for intellectually disabled students that cannot be understated is the positive effects on attitudes and perceptions regarding the capabilities and economic value of this population within society (Gaylord-Ross, Forte, Gaylord-Ross, in press). In a study completed by Greenan et al, (2002), where ID students within an employability education program were placed with employers on a work experience practicum, employers were very satisfied with the specific job skills these students possessed but pointed to the academic skills that were really impressive for this population. The results of Greenan et al.'s (2002) research points to two important things; students with ID have proven to employers and fellow employees that they can fill an important role within the economic function of a business or industry; and with the right support, students with ID are capable of applying academic skills within a job beyond entry level, menial and repetitive tasks. This assertion allows the prospect of job growth and promotion for ID students in the world of work that expands the societal expectations that traditionally have been limited due to societal preconceptions about their capabilities.

**Communication Frameworks and Strategies**

The scholarly research and study in the area of communication is both vast and varied. Within the area of educational leadership most of the research regarding communication is adapted or transferred from the fields of business, government and medicine (Aspegren, 1999; Goby & Lewis, 2000; Makoul, 2001). However, there are gaps in the research surrounding principal communication of employability to parents, and more specifically employability of special needs students. Need for more focused study on how parents can be given the information they require to make logical and sensible decisions based on the best interests of their intellectually disabled child is very apparent. Principals can apply traditional theories of leadership communication such as the Shannon and Weaver Mathematical Theory (1949), where a sender, receiver and mode of communication are specified and a more quantified and clinical method for communicating ideas are taken so as to remove emotion and convey information in a clear and concise way. Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) approach fails to take into account the context of a parent with an ID child who may be in a state of grieving the loss of their child’s potential due to the diagnosis of cognitive, academic and adaptive deficits that afflict mild intellectually disabled students. In reviewing the literature regarding the best, most empathetic approach principals should take when communicating with parents of ID students, I chose to focus in the field of medicine where health care professionals have vast experience communicating clearly and professionally but also with empathy. Often health care professionals engage in crisis communication where unpredicted or undesirable information is conveyed by an organization that can have a massive impact on a person. To the receiver this may be initially interpreted as bad news. In reviewing the communication literature in the field of medicine two key frameworks are prevalent; Image Repair Theory (IR), (Benoit, 2015; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017) and Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT) theory (Coombs, 2015; Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Although influential, both of these frameworks emphasize maintaining the positive image of an organization and place little focus on understanding the emotions or anxiety of the receiver.

**Application of The Communication Framework**

 Principals require a framework that takes a more supportive and empathetic approach to clearly and supportive communicating employability education for ID students to parents. Tan, Pang and Kang (2019) through their research have blended the common medical communication best practices SPIKES (Baile et al., 2000) and COMFORT (Villagran et al., 2010) along with study in the area of crisis communication, to develop the communication framework CONSOLE that accomplishes the goal of clear and empathetic communication for receivers who may be experiencing anxiety or grief. See table 1 CONSOLE (Tan, Pang and Kang, 2019) framework that has been used as the basis of my principal communication strategies for employability education for mild intellectually disabled students.

**Table 1.**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Abbr** | **Code** | **Definition** | **Specific Principal Communication Strategies** |
| **C** | oherence | Communication strategies and key information are consistent and used by teachers and school leaders. | -In Alberta, Canada a province-wide criteria for Opportunity programming (mild intellectual disability employability education) should be implemented. Until then, Principals should collaborate in order to self-align.-Consistent vocabulary and descriptors designated throughout school divisions modeled by school leaders and used by teachers and support staff.-Key definitions of intellectual disability; employability (mild, moderate and severe).-Individualized learning plans utilize consistent vocabulary, strategies, descriptors and recommendations.-Consistent reference to concrete examples of academic, intellectual and adaptive function that are easily observed.-Development of a FAQ’s page. |
| **O** | rientation | The need for information is anticipated and communication is planned in advance. | -Open lines of communication between feeder schools and specialized sites through information PD meetings, Inclusive Learning meetings, principal leadership meetings, regarding programming of specialized sites and their entrance criteria.-Timelines are established to ensure students, parents and schools have ample time to prepare for transitions to a specialized site or seek out appropriate programming if they are not eligible.-PD for principals and teachers annually, geared towards how to evaluate psychological reports and accurately complete teacher/parent behaviour evaluations used for establishing student intellectual coding. |
| **N** | uance | Student/parent friendly language and concrete examples are used. Cultural sensitivity and awareness should be taken into account. | -Specific care is taken to ensure students and families of all cognitive levels and cultural backgrounds understand the strengths and limitations of their ID child in relations to the academic, intellectual and adaptive levels indicated in their child's psychological assessment.-Case studies that lay out specific examples of students who meet criteria and students who do not that demonstrate the levels of student success.-Interpreters.-Clear and concrete examples of employment related work skills-Compare and contrast mainstream curriculum with adapted and/or modified curriculum for ID students.-Visual chart or exemplar that shows deficits in comparison to mainstream programming eg. bell curve example to help explain numbers and percentiles.-Provide adapted information packages, presentations for lower cognitive functioning parents and non reading or ELL parents. |
| **S** | upport | A team approach to supporting the child and family is emphasized. All partners eg. principal, counselor, teachers, consultants, psychologists must be identified and accessible to the child and family. | -Team meetings/collaboration between all stakeholders led by the school principal.-Principals to provide student and family access to the school counselor.-Principals to provide access to mental health support within the education system for students and families and provide connections to community support services.-Individualized Education Plan collaboration between parents, child and teachers at regular intervals throughout the school year. These are opportunities to emphasize student strengths and struggles and communicate learner needs, employability skill development and best programming options. |
| **O** | ngoing | Continuous support and communication is provided. Avenues of support are identified and continuously open in order to address parent, student or teacher and principal concerns and questions. | -Yearly LSP development/living document based on multiple teachers/parent/student collab-Access to updating assessments as students make school/adulthood transitions-Principal to extend instruction and support over a greater time period.-Facilitate regular meetings with parents, students, teachers and psychologists/consultants.-Ability to adapt and modify existing programming and modify student schedules to allow for extension of time to complete a course across semesters. -Continually supporting the student also supports the parent and alleviates parent anxiety. |
| **L** | eadership | The school principal/leadership initiates the communication process and ensures all steps are taken. | -Principals must ensure accountability of all stakeholders in implementing this communication framework.-Principal can delegate to AP, counselor, teachers how to share information and provide visuals.-Principals can connect with other schools to ensure programming is appropriate for student needs. -Principal responsible for all communication in their particular school.-Principals will model the strategies provided. |
| **E** | mpathy | All communication with parents and students is aimed at emotionally supporting the parents and child. Use positive language and apply understanding. | -Utilize grief counseling strategies eg,listening, pointing out strengths/possibilities-Encouraging “rethinking” or reconsideration of goals and potential careers based on ability level.-Emphasize that the school role is that of support of both the child and the family.-Appeal to the basic needs and aspirations of the child. For example, ask questions like, “what makes your child happy? What makes your child feel valued? What goals does your child have? What career do you see your child doing?”-Provide hope through encouraging realistic possibilities. For example; happiness, employment and friendship and stress that specialized sites are very effective in providing these for ID students.-Remind parents and the child that the definition of success is unique to each child/person.-Understanding and acknowledgement of parent and student sadness, avoidance of logical choices and/or sense of loss. |

**Conclusion**

Ensuring every student, regardless of ability and cognitive function, reaches their full potential is the moral and professional obligation of all educators. For students diagnosed with mild intellectual disability, employability education programming is an effective tool that can be used to accomplish this goal. Many parents, students, teachers and principals have expressed their lack of knowledge and increased anxiety around what employability education entails, what mild intellectual disability is and how programming differs in relation to mainstream, academic education. Furthermore, principals have expressed a lack of strategies as to how this information should be communicated. The communication strategies adapted from the CONSOLE (Tan, Pang and Kang, 2019) framework gives principals a plan based on research that allows for fact-based communication in a supportive and empathetic manner. Principals must understand that many parents of mild intellectually disabled students are often confused, worried and in mourning. They require guidance, but also honesty in order to make informed and logical decisions regarding the programming their child would most benefit from. The leadership principal’s must demonstrate in this regard should center around clear and effective communication. Intellectually disabled students and their families deserve these efforts.

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