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## LEARNING NOTE

# Safe to Learn: Part 3

## Supporting safe environments for children with learning challenges

In partnership with:



End Violence  
Against Children

## **About International Alert**

International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace. We focus on solving the root causes of conflict with people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we bring people together to build sustainable peace.

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# Introduction

This learning paper has been developed by International Alert as part of a series of learning papers that capture and collate the knowledge and learning gained through our Safe to Learn project in Lebanon. This project is part of the global Safe to Learn initiative dedicated to ending violence in and through schools.

The aim of these learning papers is to share our learning in promoting a safe learning environment at various non-formal education centres. These learning papers are made publicly available to all stakeholders to help enable those working in learning centres to create safe environments in and around their learning centres.

This paper explores how to establish a violence-free educational setting specifically for children with learning disabilities, difficulties or challenges. Most of the ideas proposed in the paper come from teachers who enriched the discussion through their exchange of ideas in one of the facilitated learning circles that were part of the Safe to Learn project.

**Safe to Learn is an initiative dedicated to ending violence in and through schools, so children are free to learn, thrive and pursue their dreams.<sup>1</sup>**

To date, Lebanon, along with 14 other countries, has endorsed Safe to Learn's call to action, which sets out principles, commitments and measures to end violence in schools.<sup>2</sup>

In 2021, International Alert, in partnership with Basmeah & Zeitooneh, the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS), Damma Foundation and Sawa for Development and Aid, took part in the Safe to Learn initiative to prevent and address violence against children in learning environments in Lebanon. The objective of the project was to increase the evidence base and capacity of learning centres in Lebanon to reduce violence against children in areas with high concentrations of vulnerable populations, including refugees.

## Terminology

Before discussing the different dimensions of the topic related to learning challenges, it is crucial to examine the language used. The wording is important in this context, as many implications accompany the choice of the terminology used. Calling these learning challenges a 'disability' indicates a

lack of ability, instead of a different ability. This may suggest that thorough follow up, along with close supervision and the creation of an individualised action plan may not be enough to restore an ability, rather these strategies may only help alleviate some symptoms of the difficulty. Since difficulties can be a temporary response to a maladapted curriculum, we recommend using another word that has less judgement and more openness to change, such as the word 'challenge'. You will find the word 'disability' used in the paper, as it is commonly used; we remain conscious of its implications and advocate for the use of the word 'challenge', especially when addressing students and/or their families.

In the facilitated learning circle with teachers, as well as in the following paper, we adopted the word 'challenge' because it implies a more inclusive view of the struggles children face in class. Learning challenges can lead to violent behaviour among students in a setting that follows certain criteria for success and uniformity. Students who struggle with learning challenges can be shy or aggressive, either behaviour pushing them further away from the rest of the group they are with. Such avoidant response impacts the classroom environment heavily because it leads to stigmatisation of the student, which ultimately leads to violent behaviour by the student or the other students. The objective of the paper is to look at these responses, see where intervention can lead to less violence and more inclusion, and examine what can be done to make the learning environment safer for children facing challenges.

## Research on informal education and inclusion

The fourth goal of the Sustainable Development Goals is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". This goal indicates the importance of giving equal access to education for all children, regardless of the differences in their abilities or the challenges they are facing. One major starting point is questioning the value of inclusion in non-formal education centres where refugee children are faced with complex layers of problems.

Research with regards to refugees has mainly been limited to physical disabilities, excluding the other challenges that go under the umbrella of disability. "Recognizing disabilities may be limited to observable disabilities and not necessarily those that affect the child's ability to learn."<sup>3</sup> Invisible

disabilities are harder to identify and, if not addressed, can lead to disruptive behaviour, attention-seeking attitudes and impatient management of children who do not want to fit in.

Unfortunately, even though some reforms have introduced more understanding and diversity in the classroom, we still use “school curricula that solely rely on passive learning methods, such as drilling, dictation, and copying from the blackboard, [which] further limit access to quality education for children with disabilities”.<sup>4</sup> This is where the Safe to Learn implementation in Lebanon is important to the value of informal education that promises a form of healing through the education programmes.

## Teachers’ perceptions of students with learning challenges

Disability can be one of the topics that is least understood by teachers and the community at large. Teachers hold many myths about disability that should be dealt with before thinking of any kind of intervention to support children facing challenges. Surveying the participating teachers in our third facilitated learning circle, it became obvious that many teachers think of students who have learning challenges as being less clever than those who do not face any challenges. Another misconception that teachers have is that learning challenges are treatable and can therefore disappear. Teachers need to be aware that such challenges are often genetic and need to be managed for life. A third myth relates to the role of the home environment in causing children’s challenges. The majority of teachers are aware of the genetic causes behind most of the learning disabilities, yet they still think that the home environment plays a pivotal role in sharpening or dealing with the disability. The final myth that needs to be addressed is about the ability of students with learning challenges to succeed. Unfortunately, many teachers hold a strong belief that students with challenges are not capable of reaching higher goals in life. For teachers to be able to support children with disabilities, they need to start by addressing their own misconceptions about these children.

The prevalence of beliefs among teachers based on myths rather than reality prompted us to examine these beliefs and the prejudices surrounding learning challenges or disability. The majority of teachers seem to focus on the various levels of learning that students bring to class and judge the

children based on those levels. This differential treatment can push challenged students to isolate themselves and find comfort in staying away from the others who remind them of their differences. No matter how clear the objectives of the lesson are, a learning challenge can infringe on the student’s learning experience, making the lessons difficult or impossible to grasp. This undoubtedly leads to behavioural problems since the child develops this fear of public shaming for their disability (which they cannot explain or justify). They either avoid the other children or seek their attention through jokes, a forced sense of humour to bully the teacher or other students, misplacing the attention of the group on their behaviour instead of their academic performance.

Moreover, many teachers link learning disabilities to differences in IQ levels, which eventually leads to stigma about the child’s ability. A student who is not keeping up with the group is frequently considered less smart, slow, and incapable of succeeding. In some schools, the student would be overlooked by some teachers who are mindful of the time they have in class and prefer to focus on the majority of the students. The stigma here keeps growing and the student is gradually ignored by everyone involved in the academic setting, including friends.

The culture of the academic environment can have a great impact on how the students perform and perceive themselves. If the aim is purely to attain the highest grades, then weaknesses have no place in such a setting. If, on the other hand, the academic setting is more focused on the students’ wellbeing and growth together as a group and individually, then a student’s learning challenge remains what it is, a learning challenge to address like any other challenge. In the current setting which relies on grade comparison among students, the weight of not fitting in and of trying to succeed without getting anywhere can lead to psychological problems.

If not addressed properly, students’ challenges can become a burden to them and force them to act in unfavourable ways. The student who feels unwelcome in class, or just different, is not motivated to attend and do the work, which leads to absenteeism and rejection. The less a student is present with their friends, and the fewer friends they have to support them when they are in class, the more isolated the student feels, and the more violence looms on the horizon from the students and from their surroundings (either at home or due to the wider crisis context). The nature of the student’s engagement in class changes and becomes challenging for everyone involved and impacts all the students’ wellbeing. Moreover, failing to reach all students

will ultimately have an impact on the teacher's perceptions of themselves and the perceptions of others, such as colleagues and administrators. Thus, instead of dealing with the learning challenge itself, the teacher finds themselves in the position of dealing with the result of the challenge, be it bullying or any anti-social behaviour disturbing the class group.

### Access to learning

Teachers agreed that their role was to provide access to education for children; therefore, a child's disability/challenge/difficulty matters very little compared with the teacher's role in providing the right pathway for each child's learning, whether through various methods of teaching, or different collaborations with experts, or even a specific action plan to implement and monitor with the student.

## Different types of learning challenge: Signs and solutions

To address the different types of learning challenges, teachers should be able to identify them and be aware of how they are manifested in the classroom. Once teachers are able to identify the different challenges, they will be able to address them in an educationally appropriate manner. The challenges identified by teachers as the most common along with the different ways to deal with them are outlined in this section.

### Dyslexia

Students who struggle with reading because of dyslexia can see confusing letters and often skip lines, letters, or words while reading. Moreover, they might read very slowly to make sure they are doing the activity correctly. The academic consequences of dyslexia can vary from an inability to learn independently, to an inability to acquire new words, to an inability to accomplish tasks. Most importantly, students can show an inability to finish or succeed at tests and exams. Some students find themselves dropping out of school because of their struggle that goes unnoticed, ignored, or avoided.

These consequences can have a psychosocial impact on students and students with dyslexia can find it difficult to communicate with peers, leading them to further withdrawal

and isolation. One of the most drastic effects to note and to revisit in the Safe to Learn project is bullying, or worse, the growth of shame causing isolation and refusal to fit in with the group.

One reaction of a teacher to dyslexic students would be to give reading tasks to other fast-reading students and to ignore the dyslexic ones all together. To help support the students in their struggle, however, teachers can focus on improving their auditory awareness of sounds through exposure to different sounds from different languages and linkages between the sounds. Teachers can also help these students analyse and form words by training them on awareness of linguistic sounds through diverse activities. Training students on words and definitions helps familiarise students with the words. Training students on sentences can be done through routine daily practice in class; for example, when asking the student for their copybook, teachers can model sentences using letters to form short words, then short sentences, which would lead to gradual acquisition of words and sentences.

### Dysgraphia

Difficulty in writing varies from inability to spell to inability to write (since writing takes a longer time than expected). Students suffering from difficulties in writing find it hard to separate words from each other. Some of them might write letters in reverse or might write on the lines with discontinuity. Eventually, students who suffer from difficulties in writing are unable academically to reach the assigned objectives in the curriculum.

Psychologically, these challenges impact the student's self-confidence and lead them to decrease their self-worth. Some students might mask their self-doubt by resorting to anti-social behaviours, such as hyperactivity, aggressive behaviour, bullying and sometimes even physical beating of peers. At other times, facing such challenges can cause self-isolation that might lead to mental fatigue and sadness. Some students can jump to relying on others and avoiding accountability for any of their behaviour, becoming too sensitive or, on the other hand, careless.

There are several strategies that teachers can use to deal with students facing challenges in writing. A good starting point for teachers is accepting the student's difficulty in writing. Creating a safe environment where these students are not ridiculed helps enhance self-confidence and self-acceptance among the challenged students. A second major step teachers can take is to reach out to parents, define the problem to them, and support them to help the

students improve their performance. Teachers can organise awareness sessions for parents, the students themselves, and other teaching staff to focus their attention on how to enhance the learning experience of the challenged students. Another valuable step would be reaching out to a specialist who can give directions and guide the educators in supporting the students and in guiding the students themselves to find their place among their peers in class.

A very useful, practical suggestion is to include concrete material in teaching writing; for example, letters can be taught using tactile, visual, and auditory content through games. The student then would welcome the new knowledge by playing with the letters, linking them to sounds, and forming small and simple words with them, before gradually building up to sentences.

## **Dyscalculia**

Dyscalculia usually accompanies other challenges. It is mostly manifested as a range of difficulties with mathematics regardless of the age, level of education or schooling experience. Students' continuous failure with maths would subject them to criticism and bullying. Such rejection and violence can force the students into isolation and avoidance of social gatherings. The student's image of self can become increasingly negative because they start feeling less valuable than their friends. To compensate for such rejection, a student can resort to more aggressive behaviour and violence in response to any bullying or attacks. The student's fragility could even make them physically weak and prone to illness. Psychologically speaking, many of the students suffering from dyscalculia start developing anxiety symptoms where they panic merely at the sight of numbers put together.

Academically, this might lead to failure not only in maths but in other subjects that depend heavily on maths. Such fears and repeated failures can lead to students dropping out of school altogether. This also impacts on their daily use of maths in situations such as buying something or receiving change. The first response once the student is allowed is to skip maths and claim they know nothing about maths. Giving up takes less effort and hurts less than receiving criticism and living with a destroyed self-image.

To support students with dyscalculia, teachers can work with them one on one and use manipulatives to help in concretising what can be perceived as very abstract. Teachers can also use specific software that is used to support students facing this kind of challenge. Another

important step for teachers is to collaborate with parents in supporting the child and unifying the strategies to be used with the student at home.

## **Hyperactivity**

Many teachers complained about students suffering from hyperactivity disorder. The most challenging aspect of hyperactivity to teachers is behavioural. Hyperactivity, if not dealt with, might lead to continuous disruption of the teaching/learning process. Indicators that teachers mostly notice are the inability of the student to stay seated in their chair for a long period of time (compared with the rest of the group) and the inability to complete their tasks. Hyperactivity can also be noticed through the student's behaviour, which continuously aims at distracting their peers in class.

Teachers generally agree that there are solutions they can employ to help such students manage their behaviour in class. For starters, they can try to integrate the student in the class environment by modifying the activities and adapting them to the student's learning style. Modifying the learning activities can even make them more relevant to the whole group and more interesting to everyone involved in class. Some teachers suggest clearing the student's environment of negative distractors, internal and external.

Teachers highlighted the importance of continuously reminding the students of class rules and the need to respect them. Finally, teachers recommend communicating with caregivers, particularly concerning referrals to other services in the learning centre.

Discussing ADHD and psychomotor disability, teachers returned to the basics of language. Adjectives such as hyperactive are often used when discussing students, implying that they are uncontrollable. The teachers participating in the group agreed to try and limit the use of the word 'hyperactive' to the glossary we use in reports, not to address a criticism of a behaviour we are not satisfied with in class.

## **Psychomotor disability**

With psychomotor struggles, the indicators teachers identified are a difficulty in controlling reactions and an inability to stop moving even when seated. Students with psychomotor disability also face problems in completing a task fully or in a tidy manner. In addition, students with psychomotor challenges find it difficult to follow instructions, be attentive or even maintain social relationships with peers.

As a result of all that, the students perform poorly and their grades suffer. As a result, the student starts withdrawing in class and tries to avoid further failure either by displaying carelessness and indifference to the lessons or a great fear of being asked any sudden question. The situation might get worse for them if they become subjects of bullying, mockery, and criticism. They may eventually avoid school altogether. A feeling of shame accompanies the youth and impacts their academic performance in the long term.

## Understanding the nature of learning challenges

A very important starting point for teachers is understanding the causes behind these challenges. Many of these challenges are biological in nature and have no treatment; with such awareness comes great understanding. This helps teachers react with less frustration or judgement, taking the situation less personally and becoming more tolerant and accepting of differences in the classroom.

**Among the educators present at the facilitated learning circles, more than 50% admitted they linked learning challenges to the family and home environment. Such a preconceived idea can invite teachers to abandon some children, assuming their role is limited. Teachers need to be mindful of their own role in giving access to all students. They also need to have specific guidelines on what to look for before flagging some traits of challenges to specialists.**

One simple thing teachers can do based on this understanding is approaching students facing challenges positively. Teachers often highlight the positive impact of complimenting students and encouraging them without favouritism. Using positive feedback and comments in class can help encourage the silent and quiet students to be more present and to participate more effectively in class, instead of avoiding attention and just limiting their activity to their physical presence. In treating mistakes in class, teachers can give compliments to students for trying and change those mistakes into learning experiences for everyone in class. Teachers have the power, and a duty, to change negative attitudes towards mistakes and promote respect for effort instead, especially among students who are prone to make mistakes more frequently. Encouraging students' work can happen through the way we look at their mistakes as well as praising their satisfactory work. The accolades that seem to

go most often to students who are fast workers polite, and silent can also include other profiles of students who do not currently get enough attention.

Finally, it is important for teachers to remember that learning challenges are limited to the students' learning experiences and not necessarily related to the students' intelligence. Even though some of these challenges cannot be treated, the educators' role is to help alleviate some struggles and support the students to improve their performance and wellbeing.

## Recommended strategies and activities

Certain activities are useful for identifying learning challenges and alleviating them. The earlier we start with those activities, the easier it is to make case referrals and accommodations for the challenged learners within the teaching cycle.

One major activity we sometimes forget about is to make the link with families; parents need to be involved from day one to support students' performance and wellbeing, and to maintain correspondence between the learning centre and the home environment.

There are numerous strategies to use in class to make sure the lesson is involving all students and can be added to the lesson to help educators have inclusive targeting. These strategies include preparing a range of activities in which all students can participate and feel accepted by the others. In order to achieve that target, educators need to be very explicit about their instructions and break them down as much as possible to support challenged students. Teachers are also expected to scaffold their learners not only in the words used, but also in body language and behaviour. Teachers are also advised to remember to address each challenge differently. This helps teachers support students' performance, improving their experience in class with their friends.

With regards to including parents in the action plans set for students, clear guidance is expected from the learning centre, since parents rely on the educational institution to help the students in academic challenges. Parents' meetings should not remain passive and/or reflective, but should try to engage the families to adapt concrete action plans at home. Small steps can be monitored to track the progress; when progress is made visible, challenged students will

be motivated. For inclusive education plans, we can refer teachers to a guide with samples they can use and adapt to the students they are working with.<sup>5</sup>

## Recommendations for learning centres

Learning centres have a major responsibility in identifying and dealing with learning challenges. Centres need to support teachers in diagnosing challenges early instead of waiting for the problem to exacerbate. Centres should try to engage parents and caregivers in creating an action plan for the student to follow both at home and in class for better inclusion of the student in the academic setting. Another important recommendation is for centres to provide their staff with training on identifying challenges and referring cases to specialist services to support the student better. Training programmes can achieve greater success if all stakeholders who work with the students are included; involving everyone is a great step towards addressing challenges holistically. Training is more effective if it is extended to parents and the students themselves through regular awareness sessions. The role of parents is of great value and is mentioned in the 2021 UNICEF brief, where it was recommended “to give particular support to parents to raise their awareness of the importance of inclusive education and to integrate them into the educational community, for example by participating in school activities”.<sup>6</sup>

All staff at learning centres should be reminded regularly of the magical superpower of kind words, compliments, encouraging smiles and gestures. As one participant in the facilitated learning circles put it, a motto we always should remember is “live, love, be you and smile”.

A fundamental recommendation is to include novelty in the curriculum, either by adapting the content and the rhythm and pace of learning to meet students’ needs, or to offer an entirely new curriculum that is more appropriate to those children. Teachers should reflect on the inclusivity of their teaching – whether they are managing to target all students in their teaching or just the most able. Teachers need to exercise more patience with their students and meet the needs of those who need the extra support.

A final recommendation for learning centres is to decrease the number of students in each class where possible. This helps with the identification of challenges, addressing

them, and building a positive relationship with the students and their families. Having smaller group of learners helps teachers to accommodate challenged students in their lesson plans and target different levels of ability and challenges. Differentiation can be more beneficial when teachers are not responsible for big groups. In a smaller class, teachers can foster a closer relationship with students, which helps build closer relationships with parents.

## Conclusions

When teachers notice a student facing difficulties in focusing on a task, finishing an assigned task, or maintaining good relationships with friends and teachers, they should be alerted to the possibility that the student may be facing a learning challenge. Teachers are better able to do this if they are well trained. Once the challenge is identified, they can start creating an individualised plan to target the student’s psychosocial state and learning challenge. They are also ready to discuss with the child’s family how best to help the student and build a good bond with the student to make sure they feel appreciated and respected.

Learning centres should be aware of the role teachers can play in identifying and addressing learning challenges. Teachers need to be supported to provide the targeted support such children need including through enhancing their wellbeing and improving the professional environment. Class sizes should not be too large to enable teachers to create a learning experience that involves all the students. Moreover, if teachers are expected to develop themselves professionally and to outperform themselves in accommodating learners with challenges, they need to be compensated appropriately for their efforts. Specialists should also be present and available to help the teachers.

Violence against children can be avoided if challenged children are not subjected to discrimination and marginalisation because of their learning struggles. Social justice is key to reducing stigma and rejection and to creating a stronger educational system. To help support challenged students’ right to quality education, learning centres need to reinforce the group dynamic through modelling inclusion and diversity in learning activities that are accessible for all. Moreover, it is critical that centres conduct reliable placement of students in classes that would help in identifying and providing the necessary support.



## Additional sources

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D. Price Herndl, Disease versus disability: The medical humanities and disability studies, PMLA, 120(2), 2005, p.593

## Endnotes

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- 1 For more information see: <https://www.end-violence.org/safe-to-learn#context>
- 2 For more information see: <https://www.end-violence.org/safe-to-learn#call-to-action>
- 3 Brief on disability inclusive education and learning, UNESCO Learning Portal, 22 September 2021, <https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/issue-briefs/improve-learning/disability-inclusive-education-and-learning>; Education Development Trust and UNICEF, Eastern and southern Africa regional study on the fulfilment of the right to education of children with disabilities, Berkshire: Education Development Trust, 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/1721/file/UNICEF-EDT-Regional-2016-children-with-disabilities.pdf>
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