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CPL Podcast: Special Needs in Mainstream Classes K-12

Host: Carly Boreland

With: Claudia Vera

INTRODUCTION:

You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:

Welcome to the JPL Podcast for the Teachers Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the editor of the JPL. I'm talking today with Claudia Vera, who represents the Teachers Federation in matters to do with special education. And I'm talking with her today about teaching students with special needs in mainstream classes. Claudia, welcome.

So, Claudia, we've got a few questions to begin with. And this is a very big, and sometimes emotional, issue for teachers, I think. Sometimes a teacher will have a particular student in their class, who they've got in mind. And they worry about them probably more than other students. And they care for them and they want to do the best for them. And often they just want to know how and what to do next to help this particular person who they really care very much for. I think there could be a benefit, though, in starting with why we make these adjustments and the reasons that we are even talking about adjustments, specifically.

Claudia Vera:

So, if we go back to what an adjustment is, it's very much about enabling our students. So, when I talk about students, I'm obviously referring explicitly to students with disability. But, obviously, every single one of our students in all of our schools have varying abilities. They've got different interests and they've got different ways of actually accessing and tapping into their skills and talents.

So, really, an adjustment is about giving that access to learning and enabling that learning. So, it's a little bit, you know, like that analogy of a key. It's really giving them the key to unlock that potential of being able to actually understand, and then be able to turn that understanding into, hopefully, lifelong skills and benefits that they've gained from schooling.

With our students we very much refer to making adjustments as an opportunity. And when we look at the implementation, we can very much look at how. So, that's generally what teachers want to know. They say, "Well, how do we actually do this?" What is, I think, really critical is that we also go back to why. Because, often, it's that why - which is underpinned by our shared values - that is really going to drive, then, the mechanics of then how we put that into place.

So, if we look at the why, we're obviously wanting to give our students access. We want to give them equitable access. And we also want to make sure that, just as with any other student, we're aspiring to, you know, for excellence in their outcomes. Regrettably, we know that, for students with disability,



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there are still significant gaps in terms of outcomes from schooling, which then unfortunately translate to gaps in terms of things like post-school education, employment, health and social outcomes. So, what we can do today in our classrooms could actually have a really important and lifelong impact for those students.

Carly Boreland:

Something else that I've listened to you talk about in the past, and it is always, to me, a really nice place to start for a teacher to think about is. I mentioned before that teachers often worry for their students, and there could be other emotions they have as well, but is it possible to think of having students with special needs in your class as a really good thing, as something that you could be excited or happy about?

Claudia Vera:

Absolutely. And that's why we use that word opportunity when we talk about adjustments because it's a two-way street. You're not only enabling that learning for the student, but that student is also teaching you how to make teaching and learning accessible to every single child that comes into your classroom. And a term - that's not something I've coined myself - but that is widely used in terms of inclusive education is that of teaching from the margins in.

So, if we're actually able to provide that access to students that are at the margins in terms of their various complex needs, in terms of the way that they learn, well, obviously that's going to benefit every single student because we'll be able to cater for that difference. And that difference isn't always going to come about as a manifestation of disability.

So, that's where it's an opportunity. It's actually an opportunity for you, as a teacher, to hone your skills and to ensure that your practice is actually meeting the needs of a diverse student population. So, absolutely. It's a real positive in that regard.

Carly Boreland:

So, the world of disability rights and supporting students is very big. There's a lot of legal aspects to it. There are lots of different options for getting help as well. And sometimes it can feel a little bit overwhelming. And, despite how big the issues around these things are, it can sometimes feel a bit isolating as well. I wonder if you could give us some tips, maybe some steps, you know, top first five things you might do if you come to school and you have a class, and you either are told or you observe - could be either way - that there's a student in your class that needs some special different extra attention in some way.

Claudia Vera:

So, perhaps if we go back to, and acknowledging yes, absolutely, in terms of legislation and policy there is so much that's out there. And seeing how we actually then connect that to the classroom. So, again,



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the opportunity that exists for us as teachers is that we can actually take that, you know, very, I guess, static law and make it dynamic within our classroom so it delivers for our students.

So, the underlying message and what's been fought for decades by people with disability is that there isn't, they're not discriminated against because of the fact that they have a disability. Now, sometimes this happens directly or inadvertently, but it is still a reality within our society in Australia in 2017.

So, what does legislation call for? It calls for the fact that when we talk about students accessing education that they get to do so on the same basis as their peers who don't have a disability. In order to do that, it calls on the student themselves or their parents to actually be consulted about what needs to happen. A person with lived experience with disability, they said apply the ATP approach, which is Ask The Person.

So, in this case, you're either asking the student or asking their associate, which is their parent or carer, what is it that the student needs in order to access learning, to be able to learn better? What do they need? That's the consultation component.

The next one would be that there's an expectation that reasonable adjustments are made. So, there's an acknowledgment that not every child with a disability is getting direct access to learning and that additional supports need to be put in place or accommodations to enable such learning.

So, what are those reasonable adjustments? That will be determined as part of the consultation. And then, of course, there need to be the supports put in place to deliver on that. So, how do you make that happen as a teacher, as a single teacher, within your class, faced with not just the needs of one student but multiple students? So, the first would be to actually know your student. That's the best place to start.

I know that we often get asked about, you know, how to cater for particular disabilities. But a label can only go so far. So, it is helpful knowing about a diagnosis and what that actually might look like for a person and how that might impact their learning. But what's even more beneficial is to actually know the person.

And that's where we try to go back to that notion of personalisation. And you do this naturally, instinctively, with any student. You know, you want to know about them. You want to know what makes them tick, what they're interested in, what motivates them. So, what's actually going to help you get them to engage in learning. And that's the same for a student with disability. The diagnosis itself is only going to tell you so much, but actually knowing the person and connecting with them, that's one of the biggest things, actually being able to develop a relationship - which goes two ways, of course, but demonstrates to that student that you value them, that you believe that their contribution matters. And that you're there to assist them and that you're tasked with assisting them in actually getting that contribution, you know, happening in the real world.

In terms of knowing your student, you also would want to talk to other people who can actually flesh out that information. So, you might be talking to previous teachers of that student. You'd definitely be



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talking to their parents or carers, or any other family that's involved. You'd be talking to the learning support team, or your learning support teacher at the school, that might have had something to do directly with the student, or the school counsellor.

So, there's a whole host of people that you could be gaining that additional knowledge from within your school. And then, of course, there are additional supports beyond. The Department also has some really useful resources that can assist you in making those determinations. So, things like their personalised learning and support signposting tool, which is known as PLASST. That's accessible via the portal. That allows you to profile the student by looking at and answering questions about the student across a number of domains. And then, that actually spits out a report. And allows you to make a judgment and prioritise where you're going to focus your efforts in terms of making adjustments for this, for your student. And that can be something that you use as an individual teacher or that you look at as a whole team as well.

Carly Boreland:

So, we've got to get to know the student, and then, start to talk beyond that. So, family, other people at the school, absolutely learning support. And then, they can also guide you. You've got the department who has some really good services, particularly this PLASST tool, and Educational Services which are accessible through the school's portal.

Claudia Vera:

Absolutely. That's a resource that I'm not sure is something that's widely known about. So, every network, previously known as regions, have a team of support officers or what was known before as consultants, who can actually assist the school in better meeting the needs of a whole diverse range of students. The way to access those support personnel, you can actually go on to the portal. You can find the Educational Services section. And when you click on that, just by the fact that you're logged into the portal under your school's code, it will actually give you the list, pre-generated list, of all the support people that are in your area. So, that's a really vital resource for you as well.

SSPs refers to Schools for Specific Purposes. It's important that you know which ones are in your area. They're also a wealth of information and expertise in terms of the teachers who are within that environment. So, you might want to tap into those people as well.

Carly Boreland:

The other thing that teachers are increasingly thinking about with support for special needs, I think, is around support for implementing the syllabuses as well. I know that we've had BOSTES and now they're called NESA. Is there some good things there as well that teachers can access for syllabuses specifically, or broader?



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Claudia Vera:

Absolutely. So, one of the benefits that come out of the Australian curriculum, and then how that's been adopted by each of the states, is that both NESA and ACARA have actually done some dedicated work to developing resources. Now, these are all web-based resources to support student diversity in our schools.

One of the important things to note with the New South Wales syllabus is that, when it was actually being developed and updated and referenced against the Australian curriculum, a Universal Design for Learning Approach was actually employed. So, all of the syllabus documents were actually considered from a UDL, Universal Design for Learning perspective, and the underlying principles of that approach. So, when that was done, it looked at whether there were opportunities for multiple means of expression, representation and engagement, which are the three underpinning areas of Universal Design for Learning.

And so, the existing documents have actually been developed in a way that they are intended to be inclusive of the full range of learners. So, for most of our students they will be able to access those syllabus documents and that content and learning without any kind of differentiation. There'll be, of course, then, a group of some of our students who have additional needs that will need adjustments made against those syllabus documents.

And then, furthermore, there might be students who actually have their needs addressed and their learning programmed against earlier stages. Or, for students in secondary, they might actually be put onto a life skills syllabus program.

But, all of that collaborative planning, you can actually access information and support for via the NESA website. There are specific section on special education. They've got a specific dedicated section on collaborative decision-making and planning, and how you would do that, what that would look like, who you would actually consult. They have information on how to make adjustments. And, importantly, as well, they also have support information about how to make adjustments in assessment. Because, obviously, it's got to happen for the full teaching and learning cycle.

And to compliment that, ACARA then also has video illustrations of what those adjustments might look like in a classroom context. So often, it's the case that you're already doing this naturally within your practice as a teacher. But it's good to actually have some more ideas about how that can be managed within the broader context of the competing needs in a classroom.

And then, the next layer would actually be how do I demonstrate within my programming that I've actually made those adjustments? And, of course, how does that then travel with the student across their schooling trajectory.

Carly Boreland:

So, we've got a bit of, well, a lot of time spent talking to colleagues, others, the student family. We've got some really good resources from the Department, from NESA as well. And then, I'm sure there's a



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host of other, you know, varying degrees of quality of information that's out there. That some of it's really great and some of it maybe is not so useful. And then, what does all this mean for boiling this down into your teaching program? So, I know that programming can be a fraught area without even adding anything else into it. But what does this mean when you're doing your teaching program whether you're in primary or high school or in a different setting?

Claudia Vera:

So, I guess one of the main things to know, and perhaps frustratingly so, is that there's no silver bullet and there's no one-size-fits-all. So, and that's why it comes back to very much knowing your students quite well and investing in a lot of that early planning 'cause that's going to deliver for you a lot, you know, throughout the year - and for that student.

The next thing is about prioritising your time, which is why tools like the PLASST are so important because they can actually zero in on where you should really be focusing on with your student. And then, the third thing is really knowing where your role begins and where it ends. So, when I say that, for example, in terms of programming, really sticking to what the requirement is, so, the Department's requirement is for programming, and not creating this massive resource that perhaps is not the most workable document. And so that that actually frees you up to then be able to make adjustments on top of that.

And there's various ways that you can actually demonstrate evidence of that adjustment within your program. It might be something as simple as anecdotal records written straight onto, you know, your program. Sticky notes that you've put on. You might have examples of resources that you've actually adapted that you might just want to copy and put straight in. You might have photos of how you've made accommodations that you want to put in as well. Records of conversations with parents when you've had that consultation with parents. Phone calls. Any kind of minutes from meetings that you might have had with specialists, with, you know, speech therapists or occupational therapists. All of that demonstrates evidence that you've made adjustment to your whole class program. And that's what's, you know, going to be the most manageable way, I guess, of actually being able to implement that within your class.

Carly Boreland:

Great. So, it's not that you would necessarily do all of those things.

Claudia Vera:

Absolutely not.

Carly Boreland:

But that you would choose ones that are going to work for you depending on the student and the circumstance and what else is going on, maybe even in the school, because there might be big things.



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Claudia Vera:

Absolutely. And it will also go to your own programming style. It will go to your own teaching style. And, as you indicated, it will go to some of that whole school planning. There may have been some whole school determinations of how you might best meet these additional needs, and how you might best demonstrate that you are addressing those within your class.

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Carly Boreland:

So, Claudia, one thing that I'm curious about, reflecting on my own teaching a little bit too, I think. I make decisions in consultation with other people, and then I start doing those things for a student. Are there any tips for how you reflect on what things are working and what you might stop doing, or change, or push on with? How do you know? How do you know if it's going well?

Claudia Vera:

So, I guess if we're looking at it in terms of reasonable adjustments, those adjustments might only be valuable within a snapshot of time for that student. Like all of our students, they are developing and growing. And we need to keep reassessing. So, it really goes back to that teaching and learning cycle that we would apply for any student. And if there's been an adjustment in place, we need to make determinations of whether that adjustment is still providing access to learning. And, I guess, the main thing that would be demonstrating that is whether our students are actually meeting the outcomes that we've indicated that they are working towards. And that's what really will guide us.

So, again, it'll be, you know, referencing again against the program. Referencing, against some of those individual goals that perhaps you've picked up with parents and carers in the consultation. And seeing where the students are actually making progress towards those.

For students with disability, again, like any student, that doesn't mean that the support that they needed at one point in time is going to be something that they'll require for their entire schooling. For a student in secondary, it might not even be a support that they need across every subject. And that's something that we see with a lot of our students.

So, it is about ensuring that we are coming back and actually reviewing those adjustments. That we're actually taking stock of where that student is at, what their development is like at a particular point in time. And then, seeing whether there's something either that we need to take away, perhaps they don't need that support anymore and they can actually be progressed. Or, perhaps there's a different type of support that needs to be put in place.



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And, I guess, when a teacher is realising, particularly for a student in their regular class in a mainstream school, that their student is really not meeting their learning outcomes or they're starting to lag behind, that's where questions perhaps need to be asked about, well, does it actually mean that we need some specialist support for the student? Do we actually need to get some targeted intervention?

So, whereas I've been differentiating my curriculum, I'll be providing some additional adjustments. But, in fact, what I need now is to go to the next level of support. And we can either look at it as a model of support, or some people refer to it as a cascade of services. But, once we've exhausted all of our resources and tools and capacities at a school level, where can we go to next?

Does it mean that we actually need to get, you know, more access, for example, to a school counsellor? Do we need the learning and wellbeing officer or advisor from the Educational Services team to come and provide some professional learning for the school? Should we actually be putting in an access request? And that's a process by which you would actually make an application to get additional, either funding or to access an alternative placement for a student.

So, again, it's about looking at that next level of reasonable adjustment to best cater for the needs of that students. So, that might be that they actually require a placement in a specialist setting. So, it could be a support class within the mainstream school. It might be that they would actually be best, their needs best addressed, within a school for specific purpose. Or, it might simply mean that some additional funds need to come through to the school in order to, you know, equip you as a teacher, equip the learning support team, and better equip the staff overall to continue to meet the needs of that student.

Carly Boreland:

You've also written an article for the JPL which is available through our website. And there's ten top tips there that you have, take home messages for teachers. Could you take us through those, really quickly, so that if teachers wanted to find out more about those things they could jump onto our website and they can look at your article and read in more detail there as well?

Claudia Vera:

The first would be to actually look at teaching students with disability as a life-changing opportunity. And, like I said before, as a teacher-practice-changing opportunity. The second one would be to personalise. So, your student is the starting point, the path, and the destination. So, keep coming back to that, I guess, protagonist of the story, which is your student. And each of your students is going to be so individual in their needs. Even if you've got a whole class, for example, of students who have autism or a particular diagnosis, there's diversity within diversity.

The third thing would be, that early investment and meaningful planning pays off. So, give yourself permission as a teacher to do that early on and you'll actually be reaping the benefits, you know, throughout the schooling year and throughout your teaching.



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The next one would be that genuine collaboration and positive relationships are vital, both in terms of you with your colleagues and those additional supports, but primarily in terms of you as a teacher and your student. If you can establish that trust, if you can value their, you know, potential and they can actually see and feel that, you're going to really be able to facilitate learning a lot better.

The next one is, and we did touch on this briefly, is that as a teacher you're not alone. It's not your sole responsibility to meet the diverse needs of a student with disability. You are a teacher within a broader system. And when we talk about education providers and the obligations that they have, specifically under the Disability Discrimination Act, you are but one part of that puzzle. And it's only when all of those parts are connected that it can really be delivered. So, you are a teacher within a school, within a Department of Education that has a broader responsibility to deliver for its students.

So, you're not alone. So, make sure that you access expertise, resources and services. And one of the things that we talk to teachers about is that an individual that goes to the doctor, for example, goes to a GP, GP says that they've actually got some needs best served by specialist. The GP is not required to meet those needs. They're a general practitioner.

So, as a mainstream teacher, you can't be expected, and you can't expect of yourself to be able to meet those specialist needs. Of course, there's so much that you can do, but that only goes so far. So, we want specialist provision for specialist need.

Customised instruction. And we already know that we have to make adjustments, accommodations, differentiate. But, in doing so, aim high and celebrate often. Because we want to hold high expectations, as we would for any other student, for our students with disability.

The next point, as we're coming to the end here of these takeaway messages, is understanding our rights and responsibilities and protecting and actioning their purpose. So, we've got a really important role because we're the ones that are at the coalface. We're the ones that are interacting on a daily basis with our students. And so, we've got a really important capacity and direct contact to be able to ensure that all that wonderful legislation, and all those things that have been hard-fought for, are actually being delivered on in the classroom in a rights-based approach.

And then, finally, for you to actually do a little bit of a, I guess, interrogation of your own views and values. Because, in doing so, the way that you actually view the purpose, the outcomes, and the processes of teaching and education and how you fit into that whole worldview is actually going to impact then on how you deliver on that for your students.

Carly Boreland:

Claudia, thank you so much. It's been wonderful chatting with you this afternoon.

You've been listening to a JPL podcast for the Teachers Federation's Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I've been speaking with Claudia Vera. And if you'd like to find out more about our podcast, or to listen to further podcasts, you can go to our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts.



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CONCLUSION:

The JPL podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

Claudia Vera was elected as a substantive Officer of the Federation in 2013. She is the Organiser for Camden-Cambelltown and Wollondilly and has carriage of special education matters. She has been involved with the Centre for Professional Learning special education course for mainstream teachers since its inception in 2012.

Claudia is a trained special education teacher and taught at Mary Brooksbank SSP for 7 years. She completed a Bachelor of Education in Special Education (Hons) at the University of Technology Sydney and hopes to continue her Post-graduate Certificate in Research in Special Education, which she commenced at Macquarie University Special Education Centre (MUSEC).

Claudia has held numerous Federation positions including Federation Representative, Camden-Campbelltown Association Executive, Association Councillor, Relief Women's Coordinator, Multicultural Officer and City Organiser. She has been a member of the Federation Executive and is the convenor of the Federation's Special Education Restricted Committee, as well as a Federation Representative on the BOSTES Special Education Advisory Committee.