

SUPPORTED STUDENTS MEANS SUPPORTED TEACHERS

EMMA BRUCE

Emma Bruce provides a special education teacher's insight on working with students with a disability...

As teachers of all students in many varied settings, we have a responsibility to meet the individual needs of each of those students. This responsibility, however, does not fall on our shoulders alone.

As teachers are the everyday point of contact between students and their education, it can often feel that we shoulder the immense weight of this responsibility ourselves. It is understandable to feel that way, especially when one is looking into the eyes of a student who needs support. It is time to consider, however, that it is not just students who need support to ensure that their needs are met. Support for students does not end at the classroom door. Supported students means supported teachers.

1. TEACHING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY – A MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE

The importance of a high-quality education for any student cannot be overstated. For those with disability it can (among other important provisions and developments): provide opportunities to develop fundamental life skills; build important social connections; and to learn, and express, self-determination. The key to this is the provision of meaningful learning experiences and support that allows our students to engage fully with those learning experiences.

As a teacher of any student, but particularly in the case of teaching students with disability, it is important to consider how their whole learning environment enables them to fully participate in all aspects of learning. This does not mean that a teacher of students with disability, therefore, becomes wholly responsible for that learning environment. That would be impossible. There are, however, actions that we can take as their most readily available point of contact.

As a teacher of students with disability, I consider this an immense responsibility and an immense privilege. My practice has improved through the development of my capacity to ensure that my content delivery and instruc-

tion caters to the needs of these students. In doing this, I hold the belief that my small steps will lead to those students taking much larger positive steps in their lives. So, while I focus on making their learning experiences meaningful to them, the experience of teaching these amazing people is also immensely meaningful for me.

2. MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE – PERSONALISED LEARNING, COLLABORATION AND POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

At the heart of the provision of meaningful learning experiences for our students is the knowledge of what our students need to fully engage with their learning. A clear understanding of learning adjustments, or environmental accommodations, that can be made to support a student with disability engaging with their learning on the same basis as students without disability is imperative. Of equal importance is an understanding of our students as individuals with varying interests and aspirations.

Teachers equipped with knowledge of a student's disability and potential strategies to support them are more able to encourage meaningful engagement with learning activities. Teachers equipped with this knowledge and an understanding of their students' interests will be able to respond more readily to opportunities for the provision of richer learning experiences. A combination of both will open the door, and provide opportunities, for these students to express themselves, build relationships and engage more wholly with their learning.

In many cases, these opportunities may not present themselves unless they are actively sought and encouraged. For example, I once knew a student who was assessed as needing support to learn to communicate choices. It was believed that this student was unable to do so independently. That student's teacher spoke with their parents, who shared the student's love for a popular character in a children's movie. The teacher

incorporated objects and images that represented that character into some of the student's activities throughout the day. The student began to independently display choice-making behaviours and to engage with learning activities focussing on particular augmented communication strategies in order to communicate those choices. Once the student was able to use these skills in activities that included the popular character, they began to generalise these skills to communicate their needs and wants during other activities. The door was opened, and that student flourished.

In light of the need to understand these students as individuals, it is important to collaborate with those who have significant knowledge and understanding of them as individuals. While we as teachers have an important role to play in their development at school, we can gain a wealth of knowledge from those who interact with them beyond the classroom. Under the [Disability Discrimination Act, 1992](#)¹ via the [Disability Standards for Education, 2005](#)² there is a legislated requirement to consult the student, or their associates, before making an adjustment³ to assist the student. Often this will be the student's parent(s)/carer(s)/family but may also involve other agencies and/or professionals supporting the student.

Embracing and facilitating opportunities for effective and meaningful collaboration on the pathway taken by a student with disability in their learning is a mutually valuable undertaking. Such effective collaboration can improve the student's learning and engagement; positively impact on our practice as teachers; as well as support the well-being of the student's family (through the establishment of positive working relationships between the school and home).

The NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) has [helpful information](#) on students with disability. It is especially useful for those seeking to better understand the [collaborative planning](#) approach to supporting students with disability.

3. DON'T DO IT ALONE – ACCESS EXPERTISE AND RESOURCES, AND BUILD COLLEGIAL LINKS

Meeting the needs of a student with disability can be a complex and challenging task. Simultaneously meeting the varied needs of multiple students with disability can be much more so. The responsibility for this,

however, does not sit squarely on the shoulders of the classroom teacher. It is important for teachers to know where to turn for support and further information.

Who to contact:

Those listed below may be available in your school.

Contact details of those who work outside of the school can be found on the Department portal.

The Department has information available on the roles of many of those available to support [here](#)

-Supervisors – Your supervisor is often your first port of call for matters to do with classroom management and professional development. This includes matters to do with the support of students with disability in your classroom. They can provide advice and liaise with other appropriate support staff. This includes the Principal, LaSTs, LST, SLSOs, School Counsellors, Assistant Principals Learning and Support (APLaS) and/or Learning Wellbeing Advisors (LWAs)/ Learning Wellbeing Officers (LWOs) as needed within the specific circumstances.

-Learning and Support Teachers (LaSTs) – a role description is available from the Department here. While LaSTs' roles vary to meet the varying needs of their schools, the role description clearly outlines the expectations on how that role is to be fulfilled to support students with disability and their teachers. It is important to note that, according to this role description, provided by the Department, "In undertaking their work the Learning and Support Teacher will not be used to provide relief for teachers/executive or to establish a separate class."

-Your Principal – Your Principal has a vested interest in supporting Students with Disability (SWD) in the school. They can provide advice and liaise with other appropriate support staff. This includes the Principal, LaSTs, LST, SLSOs, School counsellors, APLaS and/or LWAs/LWOs as needed within the specific circumstances.

-The Learning and Support Team (LST) – The composition of LSTs varies in schools depending on the local needs of the school. Often, they will include the Principal, School Counsellors (if available) and LaSTs. The role of the LST is to support SWD by facilitating whole-school approaches to improving their engagement and learning outcomes, coordinating planning processes and developing collaborative partnerships with the

school, parents and wider school community.

-Other colleagues – Teaching is a collaborative profession, and our colleagues can provide a wealth of information and support. I have often said that some of my best professional learning occurred in the staffroom via conversations with my colleagues. If you are comfortable doing so, reach out to your colleagues for advice.

-Local and/or relevant specialist teachers (such as English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) teachers as well as those in specialist settings). Reaching out to these teachers will help to extend your network and build collegial links outside of your school.

-School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs) – Their role is to support teachers, while working under their direction and supervision, to implement programs that support SWD. They often provide assistance with school routines, classroom activities and the care of students.

-Assistant Principal Learning and Support (APLaS) – A role description is available from the Department here.

-School Support contacts – Can be contacted by your school, to provide the following:

- **Learning and Wellbeing Coordinator (LWC)** – Coordination of services, programs and initiatives supporting students with diverse needs, including those with disability
- **Learning and Wellbeing Advisors (LWA)** – Engages with local schools to plan and implement strategies to support student wellbeing, including those with disability.
- **Learning and Wellbeing Officers (LWO)** – Point of contact for Principals and schools for wellbeing matters.

-School Counsellors (if available)

Consider accessing resources to further enhance your understanding

-Resources, policies and procedures available in the [Department portal](#), especially those relating to student wellbeing, education of students with disability and Work Health and Safety

-Resources and professional development opportunities provided by [NSW Teachers Federation](#) through the Federation Library, Trade Union Training (TUT) and the Centre for Professional Learning (CPL). These courses also provide ample opportunity to extend your networks as mentioned above.

Click the links below for information on each section of

the Federation’s website. Members will need to log in to access the links. Further information can be found in the Knowledge Centre of the Member Portal.

- The Library Catalogue is available [here](#).
- Useful Library [links](#)
- [Trade Union Training](#)
- [Centre for Professional Learning](#)

4. ENJOY IT - REFLECT ON YOUR PRACTICE AND LEARN ALONGSIDE YOUR STUDENTS

While teaching students with disability can be challenging, and meeting their needs can be complex, it can also be one of the most rewarding endeavours you can undertake as a teacher.

In my ten years as a teacher at a School for Specific Purposes (SSP), I considered it a personal and professional privilege to learn so much alongside the individuals I taught and the colleagues with whom I worked.

At every social event there would come the question “What do you do?” I was always proud to say that I teach students with disabilities. The reactions of different people to that answer were often thought provoking. The ones I would receive most often were protestations of “That’s so wonderful, I could never do that,” “You must be so patient,” “It must be so difficult.”

At the beginning of my career, I would often just accept these responses and move the conversation on. There was something that just didn’t sit quite right with that, but I was unsure of what it was. Once I realised, I began to respond differently. I wanted to flip the narrative of those conversations from “it takes a great teacher to teach students with disability” to “teaching my students makes me a better teacher.” Because it did.

The processes, strategies and systems that are needed in order to meet the needs of students with disability will challenge you in ways that you cannot foresee. It requires honest reflection on your approaches to education, guided by an understanding of the student as an individual, and implemented within the broader scope of the whole class, the whole school and the public education system. Part of this reflection will require an understanding of your role within that system, your ability to change it or, when necessary, work within it. It is also important to recognise your ability to combine your knowledge and practice with the resources available to you (including support from outside the classroom

door) and to bring everything together for each moment that is so vitally important for each student. While there is undeniable complexity in meeting the needs of these students, there is also substantial joy in helping them to achieve their goals.

In developing your ability to cater for the needs of students with disability, you will simultaneously build your capacity to meet the needs of all students in your charge, in whichever setting type you find yourself. The strategies and practices that help students with disability are of immense value to all students.

END NOTES:

1. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) is federal legislation that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in Australia. The DDA makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person in many areas of public life including employment, education, housing and accessing public places.
2. The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DSE) outlines the obligations of education providers, such as the Department of Education, under the DDA. The main premise of the DSE is to ensure that students with disability are able to access and participate in education on the same basis as students without disability
3. An adjustment is defined in section 3.3 of the DSE as a measure or action (or group of measures or actions) taken by an education provider that has the effect of assisting a student with a disability:
 - i. in relation to an admission or enrolment — to apply for the admission or enrolment; and
 - ii. in relation to a course or program — to participate in the course or program; and
 - iii. in relation to facilities or services — to use the facilities or services; on the same basis as a student without a disability, and includes an aid, a facility, or a service that the student requires because of his or her disability.

REFERENCES:

Centre for Professional Learning (CPL) website <https://cpl.nswtf.org.au/>

Department of Education (DoE) website – Disability Learning and Support, Roles and Responsibilities [Roles and responsibilities \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/roles-and-responsibilities)

Department of Education (DoE) website – [Role of the](https://www.nsw.gov.au/role-of-the-learning-and-support-teacher)

[Learning and Support Teacher Role of the Learning and Support Teacher \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/role-of-the-learning-and-support-teacher)

Department of Education (DoE) website – Roles of the Assistant Principal Learning and Support [Role of the Assistant Principal Learning and Support \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/role-of-the-assistant-principal-learning-and-support)

Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)

Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Cth)

NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) website – Collaborative Curriculum Planning <https://education-standards.nsw.edu.au/wps/portal/nesa/k-10/diversity-in-learning/special-education/collaborative-curriculum-planning>

NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) website [Students with disability](https://www.nsw.gov.au/students-with-disability)

NSW Teachers Federation website <https://www.nswtf.org.au/>

NSW Teachers Federation website Trade Union Training <https://www.nswtf.org.au/courses/?type=TUT>

NSW Teachers Federation library catalogue [LIBERO WebOPAC Search Simple \(W501\) \(nswtf.org.au\)](https://www.nswtf.org.au/libero-webopac-search-simple)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Bruce was elected as a NSW Teachers Federation Organiser in September, 2022. As part of this role, she is also the Officer with carriage of matters related to students with disability.

Emma is a teacher of students with disability who began teaching in 2011 in Western Sydney, predominately at a large SSP where she has taught for 10 years. She has held the roles of Federation Representative, Women’s Contact and Assistant Principal. She was a Councillor and Special Education Contact of the Parramatta Teachers Association.

Emma was a Federation Project Officer and Relief Officer prior to her election as City Organiser in 2022.