**Bec:** It was called word cracker. And it just helped break down the words of this child learn more about the words and how sounds work and how they went together. He just went, oh, now I get it. And it was just beautiful.

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: That’s principal Bec Fahey, talking about the positive difference intensive one-on-one support made to one of the students in her school.**

**Bec:** They slowly and gradually gained more confidence in their own abilities. They had quite a negative head set about their learning. I'm just dumb, I can't do it.

Our ability to impute meant that we could put some extra services around that child, some extra supports in their learning, and they were able to close the gap.

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: This is Disability Conversations. The second season of the NCCD Portal series.**

**Hi there – I’m Serpil Senelmis.**

**In this episode, we’ll break down how schools can successfully impute a disability when a formal diagnosis hasn’t yet been made.**

**And we’ll share some key approaches schools could adopt when talking to families.**

**MUSIC**

**First. A quick reminder of what imputing a disability means.**

**Bec:** So, it's not a diagnosis. We just make an informed decision based on the functional impact on the child's learning to support that child to access the learning.

Hi, I'm Bec Fahey. I'm the Principal at St. Joseph's school, Peterborough in South Australia.

We collect a lot of evidence, a lot of data to help us make those decisions. In a school there are so many different elements of data. So, if we were to look at for example, perhaps the reception year one. So, a lot of literacy-based assessments that are done right at the start of school. So straight away, that can be a little bit of an indicator for us if there might be a child that hasn't presented at the beginning of school with the skills that we may normally expect.

**SERPIL: Other types of evidence of a student’s school experience is recorded in documents such as support plans, consultation records and observation notes to impute a disability.**

**Bec:** There also is obviously conversation with parents and families along the way as well. And sometimes they will take it upon themselves to get assessments done. And it becomes obviously a diagnosed disability, but in our community more often than not, there's not that availability to get those assessments done easily.

**SERPIL: Bec works in a very small school. There’s just 62 students and the school is placed in South Australia’s second lowest socioeconomic government area. With that comes intergenerational trauma, unemployment, and overall disadvantage.**

**But the school has worked out ways to access resources and useful information to tackle the big obstacles that come their way.**

**Bec:** There are two other local Catholic schools in towns nearby. And we work as a little mini group, I suppose you would say. And we support each other through some moderation, through conversation, to help compare, as well, where students are at in different schools. Just to see if we are actually on the right track with where we're thinking around imputing disability.

Being a small school, at the moment we've got seven teachers, including myself as the principal you don't have two or three teachers teaching the same year level that you can bounce your ideas off and your thoughts around a child and where their learning is that. So, it's really important to reach out and use your other schools and other colleagues as that brains trust to help make some of those decisions.

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: Over in St Ives in New South Wales, evidence also plays a key role in being able to impute disability.**

**Helen:** We're only a seven to 12 campus. And we get a lot of good information about students before they come to us. Our role as diverse learning is to be aware of the range of needs of students within the college.

Hi, I'm Helen Thomas, and I'm the Head of Diverse Learning here at Brigidine College, St Ives.

It's not as straightforward process and there isn't necessarily a one size fits all approach as many considerations are made, such as the family and the home dynamic, individual student needs, there might be some privacy or advocacy issues that we need to consider. And then we need to carefully select what kinds of data collection are most appropriate based on the student's underlying need for intervention.

**SERPIL: Helen explains the significant benefits students experience because of the adjustments they receive for an imputed disability.**

**Helen:** We spend a lot of time working with classroom teachers about being subtle in the ways that they are providing adjustments. Open-ended tasks, universal design of tasks – they are the answers that benefit all students in a classroom instead of having to readjust and make changes to things. Having it nice and open and accessible by all students in the first instance is the best way to go forward.

By making tasks open and accessible by a range of students, we get rid of the need to have the labels and that's better for all students, their wellbeing, their performance in the classroom. It's a much better environment for learning.

**SERPIL: But before schools impute a disability, it’s important for them to first rule out other factors.**

**Considerations such as domestic violence and English as an additional language come to mind.**

**So, how can schools do this?**

**Saisha:** So, it's that understanding of the DDA and the DSE and our obligation of obviously to the legislation of the land – that's the starting point. To be able to distinguish clearly, are you making adjustments for a learning difference or a learning difficulty or a learning disability. And that definition of a learning disability is very, very clearly articulated in the DDA.

**SERPIL: Just to be clear, the DDA is the Disability Discrimination Act and the DSE is the Disability Standards for Education.**

**And that there is Saisha Khanna - a consultant in inclusive practice. She sits within the Early Years and Education Services within the Northern Territory’s Department of Education.**

**There are many challenges schools face when imputing disability.**

**Socioeconomics obviously plays a role – like Bec pointed out earlier – but so does geography.**

**The NT covers a region six times the size of the UK – which means teachers there face a unique set of challenges. Saisha explains what it’s like in the Northern Territory.**

**Saisha:** The challenges for these schools are of course the remoteness of not having what one would have if you were in a city to those support services and those multi-agency, multi-disciplinary assessments that are quite easy to access in a city. So, definitely the context proves to be a challenge – because I do go and work with a lot of remote schools.

It is a transient population as well. And when we do talk of imputing disability and ensuring that they are counted in the NCCD, we need that 10-weeks evidence. That in itself becomes a challenge.

**SERPIL: The evidence Saisha refers to is the requirement that schools have proof that they provided adjustments to address the functional impact on schooling due to that disability – for each student with disability.**

**These adjustments must have been provided for a minimum of 10 weeks over a 12-month period preceding Census Day – that’s in August every year – for the NCCD data collection.**

**But what many teachers everywhere tend to struggle with says Saisha is the idea of imputing a disability.**

**Saisha:** There is a lot of discomfort when you say, ‘what disability do you impute,’ because your head goes straight to, ‘I'm not a medical professional, I'm not an allied health professional. How do I do it?’

The second thing is also having a clear idea about what are your four categories that you can report against. And having a clear understanding of those four categories of where you're making those adjustments. Another one that comes to my mind is around storage of evidence and collection of evidence.

**SERPIL: And it’s important to remember that teachers have a wealth of knowledge that is useful in the imputing process.**

**Here’s how Helen Thomas sees it.**

**Helen:** They’re very good in being able to identify if there are students that seem to be not making the expected progress. That information comes back to us. That referral system has made it much easier to track and gather evidence on those students that we feel we may be able to impute a disability for.

We contact the parents. Talking to them about any old reports that maybe they didn't provide that might suggest that they had any concerns. We have planning meetings with parents twice a year, for those that are identified.

**SERPIL: Bec Fahey says imputing a disability allows teachers to give students the best support – which means it can have huge benefits for the student’s learning outcomes at school.**

**Bec:** Sometimes it can be quite obvious what the child's needs are. Because of lack of services in our community, families need to travel a minimum of an hour or two to even get to a service. Services are so booked up, it takes minimum six months to even get an appointment. So, there's a lot of time wasted if we had to wait for that official diagnosis.

We can get financial support to help with those adjustments without having to wait months and months for those formal pieces of paper to come through. Sometimes it can be difficult for a family, a family member, a parent, to accept, or to understand that their child may have a disability. That, sometimes the word disability can be quite confronting for a parent. So, using that imputing ability, we can potentially close the gap for that child a lot earlier in their education.

The application for collecting data for NCCD has been a really big, positive, I think in our system in the last couple of years.

**SERPIL: Yet the experience is not always positive for families – as Bec mentioned earlier.**

**Parents can have concerns around stigma associated with disability. And they could be left struggling with the question of, ‘will my young person carry a label?’**

**Helen Thomas says having conversations with parents regarding imputing a disability requires pre-planning and a careful approach.**

**Helen:** Obviously there are some parents that don't like the labelling attached to being imputed with any kind of disability. For some, it is like a poor reflection on their parenting skills or their gene pool or whatever it is they feel. Often, because we're a secondary setting, ‘Oh, I should have done more when they were in primary school, I didn't know.’ So, that's why we take particular care when we're talking to parents about the need to impute a disability. So, it needs that measured, careful approach.

The diverse learning teachers would have already collected feedback from the teachers of the student and have other data to present the parents such as maybe diagnostictesting, if we've done that, because of class observations and concerns. So then, provide the parents with an opportunity to discuss any of their own concerns that they may have had. And, then make some suggestions as to what the parents should do next in terms of formal assessment.

Depending on the circumstances we would suggest the usual screening processes of eye tests and hearing tests before visiting the family GP to discuss concerns and possibility of gaining a formal educational assessment. But any formal diagnostic tests performed at school should be obviously shared with the family.

**SERPIL: When having these conversations with parents, Saisha Khanna says cultural context can also be very important. For instance, in some Indigenous Australian communities, disability is seen as just part of that person’s make-up.**

**Saisha:** There are some Indigenous parents who believe that they should not or cannot interfere with the school system. How do you impute a disability and discuss that with parents when there is no recognition or perception of their disability existing in that culture?

So, where do you even start from, in terms of letting a parent know that there is a disability that this young person has or we are imputing it, or we believe that there is something more there.

**SERPIL: So, what’s Saisha’s advice to schools around framing conversations related to imputed disability when talking to families?**

**For one, interpreters can help with communicating effectively with families who speak English as an additional language.**

**The other thing is to understand the cultural context the families operate in.**

**Saisha:** My entire conversation with the family and extended family who did come to a school was around, ‘what are we providing for the young person to access education?’ And that seems to be an in point. Rather than saying these are the deficits or they can't access education on the same basis as their peers, or they’re behind.

What does disability mean in that culture? It's very important to understand what that means, because you have to approach it with that lens and that's being culturally responsive. Is it going to get difficult for mum at home because her young person has been imputed with disability? What are those factors playing within the family context for the young person will be exposed to that at home. And it's asking questions, maybe starting with ‘how do you view disability in your culture?’ Learning that in the first place.

**SERPIL: And there’s more schools can do to ensure ongoing and constructive communications with families.**

**Saisha:** Having an avenue to meet that person on a social, like barbecue space, making it a little informal really helped. There wasn't somebody typing and documenting every word that was being spoken, as sometimes that happens in case conference meetings, because we want to capture everything. But that informal meeting led to a formal meeting where, ‘how can we make it better? What do you look forward to for your young person? And what are the ways that we can support?’ And NCCD was one way of actually capturing the needs and then moving ahead.

It's the parent feeling comfortable to know who they're talking to. Sometimes having a whole school team sitting around can be intimidating, leave alone for the young person, but for the parent, if they don't know who's around the table.

So, even simple things like setting up your room: have you got some water? Have you got somebody who will welcome you at the door? What is the seating arrangement look like? Is there an agenda given before a case conference? What are we going to discuss? So front-loading parents for those meetings, as we would do for the young person as well.

That communication has to be open. Where parents are welcomed into the school and they can see their young person in action and feel that when a child is away for how many ever hours, this is where they are. That's really important to give the whole picture and never, like we say, never dumb down the curriculum for our young people, never dumb down the reporting for our parents. It is important for them to know, ‘where is my child at? What has been done. And what is the next step?’ So definitely communication of that, making it transparent.

Also having a family voice of ‘what would they like to see? What are their priorities,’ that might be quite different to what a school's priority is and perhaps being a little more inclusive of that.

**Serpil:** And does the communication have to factor in the parents’ work, their lifestyle, their literacy, their communication methods, because some parents might just like a simple text, some might actually want a workbook with diagrams. What are the considerations in how we communicate with parents, because like all children, parents are also different?

**Saisha:** I think it is about fitting it in your program and routine and not making it an additional thing. I haven't come across any schoolteacher or a school where teachers have not put themselves out for their young people. They're committed, and especially in the remote, the commitment is tremendous.

**SERPIL: And when establishing and maintaining communication with families, Bec Fahey says every conversation needs to keep the student in the centre of the discussion.**

**Bec:** Any parent wants their child to be happy and safe in their learning. And so, if we can sort of paint that picture for the parent, really make sure the child’s at the centre of the conversation. So, the data helps obviously to build the story, but we want the child to be at the centre and we want the parents to know that everything we are doing and even the conversation that we are having around disability is all about supporting their child and ensuring that they can be successful in their learning.

**Bec:** It's the care and concern and just engaging everyone in the conversation. It's not an us and them. It really is a team, and the school needs the parents on board

because it doesn't work when only one part of the team is doing their role. We really do need everyone to be working together and on the same page, as we like to say, to really engage with what's going to support your child to be as successful as they can be. How can we help at school? What things can you maybe do at home? And let's do this together.

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: As schools and families become one team, the lived experience of the student across their different environments also needs to be a key consideration.**

**And putting the student in the centre of conversations, means recognising the power of the student voice.**

**Bec:** The conversation needs to engage the student as well. Sometimes it's difficult for a student to share their voice, or they may not have the words yet. But you can still engage them in a conversation around, what they enjoy about school, what they maybe don't enjoy, what they think they might need support in.

So, when those conversations are happening, sometimes it is that the school leaders or the school team and the parents have conversation, but where possible you have that child in that same conversation and sharing their thoughts and concerns and worries. So obviously the older the child gets, the more that they can share.

**SERPIL: Saisha Khanna reiterates this point.**

**Saisha:** First and foremost is the power of the student voice. And it's also empowering the student to know that they don't have to do it alone. It's about we care enough to hear you and to support you through your schooling journey.

Sometimes the young person and their teacher relationship is so strong that they can actually team up and get the parents on board to work alongside with the school and support the young person wherever they may need it. The other thing which is really important is young people also help us to understand what some good things are happening at home which then can be perhaps mirrored or translated into a school setting. So those adjustments continue right through. It's not as if school ends at three and bang the adjustments don't happen anymore.

**Serpil:** Because essentially the young person is the conduit between school and home.

**Saisha:** Absolutely. Yes. And it is about the young person at the end of the day, it is person centred.

**SERPIL: But what happens if the school and families are not on the same page?**

**The good news is, there are tried and tested strategies to forge collaboration – starting with empathy.**

**Saisha:** It is empathy. It is also about being transparent in your practices. Having those regular meetings, being available in terms of how should you contact me professionally to be able to discuss this.

What comes to my mind where we were able to engage the parents was through stakeholders. They often have really good relationship with a young person and their families. Identifying those safe people and where there is trust and where there's already existing relationships, where we can start having those conversations.

**SERPIL: According to Bec Fahey it’s also important to try and meet the parents where they’re at.**

**Bec:** When you're trying to schedule in a meeting, sometimes we might look at our timetable first and try and then get the parent to fit in to that. But sometimes it's really important just to throw all that out the window and just say to the family, ‘okay, when's good for you and where is good for you?’ Because sometimes it might not be to come into the school. Maybe it is to go to a local cafe or something and have a coffee while we chat. Generally, in my experience, the parents have been more than happy to come into the school, but the timing of that meeting might need to be after school.

**SERPIL: During these meetings with families, Helen Thomas says learning support staff can play an important role in helping families who wish to seek a formal diagnosis.**

**Helen:** So, in terms of seeking a formal diagnosis, particularly for our setting, our first step is to do as much of the testing that we can provide onsite. So, whether they have done formal testing, such as NAPLAN, or those sorts of tests. We you look at those results and see if there's anything there that might indicate an issue.And then we feel in a meeting with a parent that we are confident to be able to suggest that perhaps further external support might be required, and we make a recommendation for that.

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: At the end of the day, what the process of imputed disability allows is for schools to demonstrate best practice and for students to thrive.**

**Bec:** Sometimes we can get hooked on the terminology, when essentially, it's about a child, their ability to learn in their environment, and what adjustments they need to help them to be successful. Labels – they often don't matter.

**Saisha:** It's just capturing your best practice. I often tell my teachers, ‘I want to know your best practice. How do you go about teaching a young person who is facing barriers? How do you overcome them?’ This is your chance to show your best practice.

**MUSIC**

**V/O SERPIL: You’ve been listening to Disability Conversations – the second season of the NCCD portal series.**

**Disability Conversations was produced by Written & Recorded.**

**This is an Education Services Australia podcast. And I’m Serpil Senelmis.**

**To hear more, search for Disability Conversations on the NCCD portal or wherever you get your podcasts.**

***V/O JAMES:*** *This podcast is supported by the Australian Government Department of Education for the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability, or NCCD, Portal.*

*Copyright 2022 Education Services Australia Ltd, unless otherwise indicated. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0, unless otherwise indicated.*