**MUSIC**

**LEANNE:** The role of education assistants in classrooms, often, was about an education assistant working with a specific student who needed additional support with complex learning needs.

And so, what an education assistant would do, would be to: take a student outside the classroom, perhaps give an intensive learning program (that was designed by often the teacher), and then the student would be put back into the classroom – hopefully having fixed the learning deficit.

What we found was that we were not fixing deficits for children and that children were still struggling in school contexts.

**SERPIL: This is Leanne Hillman. She’s talking about an assumption often made about how education assistants work with students with disability.**

**Leanne’s a former teacher who’s now working on a research pilot project. She’s exploring more effective ways that education assistants can work in partnership with teachers – to provide support for students with disability across Australian classrooms.**

**MUSIC**

**LEANNE:** The research pointed us to look at ways that teachers and teaching assistants can work together as partners in a classroom, rather than a substitute for the teacher that takes the child away from the learning in the classroom.

So, the exciting thing that we’re finding now is that teachers and teaching assistants are really finding creative, exciting ways of working inside the classroom together, to create learning opportunities for all the students in those classrooms.

**MUSIC**

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

**Hi there. I’m Serpil Serpil Şenelmiş.**

**In this episode, we’ll get to know the vital role education assistants play within schools. And we’ll unpack how they can contribute to the school NCCD team.**

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: First, let’s get a quick definition of an education assistant.**

**ROCHELLE:** It's a diverse job. But primarily, the main goal is to promote student engagement and access to education.

The old model used to be we were on a timetable. We would go into a class; we'd be locked into that teacher's class. Now it's a bit more targeted and student centred in that intervention and support and case management review students’ needs and requirements.

**SERPIL: That’s Rochelle Miller. She’s worked as an education assistant for over a decade.**

**Her role goes by the title of case management SSO (or school support officer) and learning community tutor.**

**It’s just one of a number of names given to education assistants across Australia, depending on which state you’re in.**

**In some states, education assistants are called teacher aides – in others learning support officers.**

**A typical day for an education assistant can be varied, and involve working with a range of students in different ways.**

**So, what does it look like in Rochelle’s school?**

**ROCHELLE:** I tend to do my rounds. I call 'em rounds and check in with my most vulnerable students; my students that require the most support. It's also a time for me to chat to my colleagues and we flag and target any priorities for the day.

We have currently upwards of 1600 students in the high school. So, the days are fast paced. Once the lessons start, I have a timetable and it's often a case of prioritising and triaging with the students that need support.

It can be anything from organising, helping them with their uniform, helping them with their lunches, or they might have come to school in a really emotional, vulnerable state. So, they might require some support to begin their days.

Sometimes, I'll go into classes and observe and provide generalised support. Other times it can be small group work. It depends on the subject requirements and the curriculum requirements of the students. Depends on what intervention program we've put in place for that particular student.

Some students only attend school on a flexible learning basis. So, they might turn up one morning a week, and in that case I'll allocate, usually, some one-to-one support time for that student. And they might be on a modified curriculum program. So, we’ll work on their particular learning goals. Other times, I'll go into a class and work with students on a need’s basis. So, it just depends.

**SERPIL: And for Leanne Hillman, education assistants can be the glue that holds classrooms together.**

**She’s been working on a PhD examining the role of education assistants in schools. And she describes the role as a dynamic partnership with teachers.**

**LEANNE:** Education assistants in classrooms have this vital, really hugely important place.If we looked at what is possibly happening in lots and lots of schools is that the education assistant is working towards becoming a really exciting partner.

It doesn't look like one practice. It looks like a whole series of teaching strategies that involve the teacher and their partnering educational assistant, working together to do that activity.

It could look like teachers working with various groups and teaching assistants working in other parts of the classroom. It could look like them both working together with all the students, with the opportunity for students to really develop their own learning and develop independence in learning, rather than having an education assistant that was specifically assigned to work with one or two students.

I think teachers very importantly lead whatever happens in their classroom. And that collaboration is the core of that understanding happening. When there's a commitment to collaboration and a planned approach, education assistants are more able to align with what the teacher is doing in that classroom.

When they're working well, we found that successful collaborations have a really strong interpersonal relationship between the education assistant and the teacher. There's a real strong, clear, effective communication that happens. The roles and responsibilities around learning is really clearly defined.

And the thing that we keep identifying is that there is a provision of time, like a scheduled, protected time where teachers and educational assistants build those relationships, find ways to plan together and then reflect on their collective work.

**SERPIL: And that collaborative partnership Leanne talks about happens inside Tamara Chesson’s classroom every day.**

**As a middle school teacher, she works closely with education assistants to support students with disability.**

**TAMARA:** We are structured into learning communities, and we have all of our classrooms in one specific area, altogether. We then have a breakout space that connects to all of those classrooms. And each middle school learning community has what we call a learning community tutor. So, it's an SSO, who is allocated to support the students in that specific learning community.

And so, there's a variety of ways that our learning community tutors operate or organise their time. The most common one is that we have a Google form that we can all access and we can set up a timetable, and what we can do is book students in to work with the learning community tutor.

We have a learner management system and that's where we put all of our lesson materials and instructions, and all of our SSOs can access that. If there's any further supports, I'd then provide them to the SSO, so that they can help the student or students’ that they're working with at that time.

And so what I might do is write down a couple of names and then next to it, I'll write down the task that they're working on, or the subject that they’ll be working in. And they will come and have a chat to me. I'll explain to them what these students need support with. And sometimes they'll work in the classroom with those students. And other times, they'll take them into the breakout space and work with them, to support them.

It's normally no more than five students at a time. I find that for lots of the students that access that support, it's really beneficial.

**SERPIL: But sometimes, the best laid plans can be met with student resistance.**

**Rochelle Miller says that’s when a strong partnership between classroom teachers and education assistants can really make all the difference.**

**ROCHELLE:** Obviously collaboration is a really key skill that needs to happen, especially in a site this big. So, we tend to take direction from the intervention and support leadership first.

So, the collaboration happens at a case management level for student’s needs, but it can also happen at a daily task level. We can modify that task to engage student interests, or we might provide an alternative task. We might reduce the content of that task, or base it around a student's particular special areas of interest. So, that can be a sort of situational then and there process.

So, is it best if I may support them in class, in a more generalised situation and provide some discretion and maybe some more electronic support, where you have a variety of devices we can use to assist that such as remote support with Google docs. Maybe not sitting directly next to that student.

If a student is a bit resistant, we might support them in a group situation with maybe a friend or other students. So, then they don't see it as such a targeted approach. Often, those students who are very vulnerable are quite aware that they need the support and they're usually quite accepting.

The learning community set up really enables us to build some solid relationships with our students. As I'm the primary SSO that is in that community, the students know me right from when they come for transition in year seven. And they'll continue in that same learning community here until year nine. So, we build some great relationships.

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: While education assistants are able to build strong bonds with students, Leanne Hillman says the role can come with some challenges too.**

**LEANNE** I think there's many challenges that education assistants are working with. And I think they cluster into two areas. How they work with teachers in classrooms and how teachers welcome and encourage them to work in classrooms in that partnership. And then also, there's an area around how the quality of educational assistants’ interaction that supports students with disability.

So, around those two clusters, when we find that teachers and teaching assistants are working well they have this opportunity to remove the barriers of access and participation, and they can find really flexible ways of accommodating student diversity in the classroom without the educational assistant being like a substitute teacher for children with disabilities.

The other area is around ways that we can support educational assistants with developing high impact teaching strategies. So, it's in a way, improving the way education assistants actually interact in their classroom interactions with students.

**SERPIL: Despite the complexities that education assistants could face in the classroom, Tamara Chesson says the benefits they bring to the classroom, outweigh the challenges.**

**TAMARA:** I love our learning community tutor set up here, because it allows the tutors to build that relationship with the students so that they are more likely to want to have that support, or to be willing to have that support.

At the core of anything that we do in schools, no matter who you are, and what you're doing in a school and working with young people, I think relationships are just so important.

**SERPIL: And because of that focus on helping students to grow, classrooms all around the country are peppered with examples of success stories – where teachers and education assistants collaborate to provide adjustments for students with disability.**

**Like this example from Leanne, where a student who moved from a smaller school to a larger one was successfully supported by the teacher and education assistant, in consultation with the family.**

**LEANNE:** All of a sudden there was a whole set of needs around how to go to an assembly in the morning. How to move from a large group, to a classroom with a much larger group of students than they were used to working with previously in their school. And what we saw happening was an education assistant really collaborating with the teacher and the family and the student and finding ways, practical daily, day-in-day-out ways, that they could support that student to find ways to be a member of that classroom.

And over a period of time, because it's not something that happens very quickly, the teacher, the education assistant and the family, with that consultation with the student have found some very practical ways that student is now participating in class learning activities.

Previously, the student would walk around the school a bit, would find ways to avoid going into classroom learning situations. And now, with this very intense caring, thoughtful way of working with the student, the student is now part of a classroom group and that's only been in over the last term and a half. So, in a relatively short amount of time, that student has found an opportunity to be a part of that class.

With that consultation process and working out how to remove the barriers from the learning, absolutely astounding and amazing things have happened through that collaboration. Being prepared to work with families has been, like, I would say breathtaking and exciting to see.

**SERPIL: So, how do education assistants support teachers to make reasonable adjustments in the classroom?**

**Rochelle Miller.**

**ROCHELLE:** I attend a case management meeting every week with my learning community team. So, that consists of our assistant principal, our learning community manager. We try and have our wellbeing leader, our middle school wellbeing leader there, intervention and support leader, myself. So, a real holistic approach, if you like, to the students’ needs.

At that level, we might discuss the requirements for a student to have a modified curriculum or to have some adjustments, and what they might look like. And the intervention and support leadership will usually communicate that directly with the teachers. We'll provide support in that process, as well, with having a conversation with the teachers about that, and we'll negotiate. We might negotiate certain tasks that will require modification.

Often with students it's not all tasks. We like to try and work out at what point they can engage with the curriculum and make adjustments accordingly. But if they're in the mainstream class, it's often a case of just providing maybe extra scaffolds, extra visuals.

Our teachers are adept at providing that information electronically for students. And we have a fair emphasis at our site on online programs being available and then being accessible to all of our students.

**SERPIL: Giving feedback to teachers about the adjustments and support provided to students is also a key part of an education assistants role.**

**Here’s how Rochelle approaches it.**

**ROCHELLE:** A big part of my role is to facilitate the inclusion of all of our students. I can facilitate that process and raise concerns and provide suggestions upon my observations and my experience.

We have a online learning system where we do pastoral care notes. So, every time we work with a student, we're required to leave a pastoral care note against that student's details. And we're trying to make those as detailed as possible as to what adjustments and modifications. Given that we work with hundreds of students a day, sometimes the notes are brief, but there will always be a record of when I've worked with a student.

**SERPIL:** Could you give me an exampleof a case scenario of a student and what that would entail and then what the teacher would do with that information.

**ROCHELLE:** Everyone on site has access to the same learner system. So, you can type in a student's name and go under pastoral care notes. I would leave my notes under tutor notes. However, if it was a behavioural issue, it would be flagged under behaviour. There's one for adjustments, modifications and so on. So, there's a lot of categories that we can flag.

A typical note for me would have the lesson, and I would state the tasks that the student worked on, the adjustments and modifications that I provided. I'd comment on the student's progress. And maybe flag any issues or required follow up for the next lesson or for the next time we worked on that subject.

Sometimes, I'll leave what we call functional needs notes. And that will be if I've observed some requirements, I think that we could put into play or some concerns around a student. If that student would benefit from maybe accessing one of our social skills or mentor groups, or any of the other various programs we run.

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: When it comes to providing students support through the NCCD, it involves every team member in a school.**

**But Leanne says education assistants play an especially important role in gathering evidence and data.**

**LEANNE:** Recently I heard of an education assistant that was involved in the collaboration with the student and the parents at a meeting where they were very deeply involved in collecting the evidence and the results of the assessments and documenting that ongoing learning that was arising from the disability.

And then there's very, perhaps, much more obvious ways that education assistants work with that implementation of the adjustments in classrooms around teaching and learning, and communication, personal care, and safety. Maybe with the individual healthcare plans of students.

And then when schools move into that reflection and review of the adjustments there's all the understanding and the consultation that happens around working out the progress and the notes that teachers and the education assistants have been collating. All the adjustments to teaching, all the adjustments to learning materials. And at each step, educational assistants are being hugely involved in that input.

And as part of a teaching team, educational assistants would be guided by teachers on what evidence to collect. So, which documentations are we going to be collecting? Stuff about the teaching and learning, and what changes we've made to the curriculum. Maybe there would be some how successful the interactions have been. So, there'd be a lot of documentation around that. And often, education assistants can support teachers in the process of actually finding that student progress data.

**SERPIL: That evidence and data collated, helps to paint a personalised picture of each student under the NCCD.**

**Tamara Chesson says the way the adjustments are recorded are quite specific – and can sound something like this.**

**TAMARA**: So and so was really receptive to the help or so and so worked really well with me today or, they struggled to focus or whatever it is. It won't just be about what was actually achieved, but also about their response to the support they were provided.

And so that lives in our system there, as a record of this student has had this kind of support. Same thing, if they access study skills. Anytime that they get some kind of support, it is always recorded in our learner management system.

**SERPIL: With all this in mind, what can teachers do to support education assistants to put their best foot forward in the classroom?**

**Leanne Hillman says research shows that collaboration between teachers and education assistants is what holds the key to classroom success.**

**LEANNE:** When teachers work along education assistants, they say it's a really good thing. And that they want to have education assistants working with them.

When teachers work with education assistants and there's a really clear understanding of roles and responsibilities, and they're clearly defined and understood by both the teacher and the education assistant, and then teachers plan how they could work with education assistants and share that information with education assistants, really great things happen.

So, when teachers are collaborating and there's an opportunity for participation in meetings and providing positive ways that they can work together, great changes can happen.

If we had an opportunity to have had collaboration and opportunities where there are meetings, where together they're working out, what are the goals? What are the learning outcomes? It's a completely different approach for an education assistant to move into that space with the knowledge and understanding of what the teacher is intending to do with the full range of students in that space.

So, when teachers and education assistants get together and collaborate and plan and work out what that will look like, this massive barrier to effective practice has been removed, and the education assistant becomes a true partnering classroom educator with the teacher.

**SERPIL: So, given that education assistants provide support to students in many ways, what advice is there for those who find themselves working across different environments?**

**Here’s Leanne’s take.**

**LEANNE:** I encourage education assistants to have discussions with school leadership and teachers in their schools about ways that they believe they can be better implemented to work in classrooms.

The other thing we're finding and something we've said consistently is that when we have the scheduling of time for that collaboration with teachers, that building of relationships, that joint planning, and that reflection on how collectively their work can be magic in a classroom – that scheduling of time with teachers is significantly important.

And then, the third area would be for education assistants to talk to school leaders about how they can improve their own personal/professional learning, and continue building ways that they become more skilled and capable learning practitioners.

**SERPIL: And at the coalface, Rochelle Miller says she prepares herself for change and can adapt to different classroom circumstances through these steps.**

**ROCHELLE:** We have to practice self-care, and I think we've all learned that with the last couple of years. This year particularly, has been really challenging. So, self-care, positive attitude.

I try and keep up-to-date with best practices. Our site’s quite inclusive of the support staff, so we get included in a lot of training and development programs that are targeted for the teaching staff, because at our site it is recognised that what we do as support staff is quite specialist and complex.

**MUSIC**

**ROCHELLE:** But more importantly, we're included in the processes.

**SERPIL: By working closely with education assistants, schools can support students in all aspects of their learning and school life.**

**Tamara Chesson echoes that thought - that education assistants are an invaluable resource to schools.**

**TAMARA:** Education support are just so vital to everything that happens in our classrooms. And they can be so undervalued sometimes, but they're just the absolute gold of the education system.

**MUSIC**

**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 Şenelmiş.**

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