**EPISODE 3: Undiagnosed social/emotional disability transcript**

**JANE:** So, this child found it really difficult. Even if there was say five questions to do on a maths worksheet, the first one, if they got stuck on that, or felt it wasn't done well enough, they would just keep doing it. And that ability that most students have where we say, ‘ah that's okay leave that one and move on to the next one,’ that was really, really hard for them.

**MUSIC**

**JANE:** So, what we ended up doing there, was we just literally had one question at a time that they worked on.

**SERPIL: This is Jane Carmignani. She’s a clinical psychologist and she’s remembering a time when a school successfully supported a student with an undiagnosed social/emotional disability.**

**JANE:** And then we had like a transition task in the middle, which usually was a sensory or a movement break. So that kind of acted as, I guess the reward, to say you’ll get this sensory movement break.

But we also had like a huge emphasis on, there's no such thing as that perfectionism. Success is about making mistakes and failing leads to that learning and having that growth mindset. So, lots of work to just help that child with their transitioning into those next activities.

**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 explore social/emotional disability.**

**This range of disabilities can affect a student’s thought processes or their perception of reality, as well as their emotions, or judgement. And it can result in disturbed behaviour.**

**So, we’ll look at signs that could suggest a student has an undiagnosed social/emotional disability.**

**And we’ll explore common adjustments that could be put in place to support these students.**

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: Let’s start with the change of behaviours you might notice.**

**CLAIRE:**  When it comes to social/emotional disabilities, it's so broad, but I suppose, often what you might see is that they're disengaged in some way, or they're displaying some challenging behaviours.

Hi, my name's Claire Jackson. I'm a teacher and I've also specialised in inclusive education for the majority of my teaching career.

It can often be that you've worked with that student for a while, and then you see a change in their behaviour or their disposition. They might not be answering questions like they used to in class, or they might be choosing to sit up the back and not engage with other students.

**SERPIL: Undiagnosed social/emotional disability can reveal itself differently, depending on the age and year level of the student.**

**JANE:** So, we're really looking for certain signs, but we're also looking for how often they present and how significant they are and how much they're impacting on functioning as well.

So, something that they weren't doing previously or were doing previously and stopped. Withdrawing from activities they used to enjoy. In the classroom, we might see a difficulty with decisions, a change in their academic performance. With young students we might see more externalising behaviours.

Hello. My name is Jane Carmignani, and I'm a clinical psychologist. And I also have a background in teaching and have worked in educational and clinical settings for over 20 years.

**SERPIL:** Could you perhaps tell me if those indicators happen perhaps gradually, or do they happen suddenly in terms of recognising what's going on with a particular student in the classroom?

**JANE:** I think it depends on age and it depends on situation. So sometimes we might see them to be quite sudden, and that might be sort of reflecting some kind of incident, or some kind of trauma, or something that's happened like in that preceding time.

With a lot of social/emotional disabilities we're looking at something that might not have immediate triggers. Something that's part of their genetic predisposition or over time in terms of their life experiences develops. So, it can be both depending on what's going on in the background.

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: Students with undiagnosed social/emotional disabilities can have all sorts of challenges when they step inside a classroom – including difficulties with executive functioning.**

**It’s an experience Chris Varney is personally all too familiar with.**

**MUSIC**

**CHRIS:** Hi, my name is Chris Varney. I am proudly Autistic and I'm Founder and Chief Enabling Officer of I CAN Network, which is an Autistic led social enterprise.

**MUSIC**

**CHRIS:** A student's working memory, their planning skills, their organisational skills, their executive functioning can be really advanced in areas of their motivation, but then they can really struggle in areas where they’re not motivated. So, for example, I was a student who loved history, because I felt like I could write alternative endings in parts of history. And I loved that. But then I had other issues, like, doing up my shoelaces took me a long time. I still do double knots in a pretty odd way.

I was very worried about the school uniform and how I looked in the school uniform. I just would get really worked up about that and didn't need to. Anxiety was a huge thing that would challenge my executive functioning more. So, when your anxiety goes up, your capacity to organise yourself goes down.

My biggest energiser is working with the kids who remind me of what I was like because that, I guess, connects me with my sense of purpose.

I remember, I felt like I was having to work harder than everyone else. I really did feel like everything was such a burden. And I didn't understand why some people coasted through some things so effortlessly. I remember when my mum told me this just means you're Autistic and it's nothing to be ashamed of – it's something to be proud of. I just started crying, because all my life I'd felt like there was something else that was at play with me.

School can be a real performance for students who just need a bit more processing time of how people are socially interacting and the emotions that other students are experiencing. And they're probably masking an enormous amount. Masking their needs, masking their personality. And that's hard to do that level of masking.

**SERPIL: That effort to fit in that Chris talks about can have a huge impact on a student.**

**It can be especially tough for those with undiagnosed social/emotional disability to build their social network.**

**Claire Jackson says it can spill into all aspects of school.**

**CLAIRE:** Often you'll see that students, particularly secondary students, they're finding it difficult to get along with other students. Often, it's outside of the classroom too. So, at lunchtime they might retreat to the library, or find a favourite teacher who they feel comfortable with and avoid those interactions with their peers.

When teachers expect students to work together and you've got a student who has an undiagnosed social/emotional disability, they might find that really difficult because they don't necessarily understand social norms. They might not be familiar with taking turns, or interrupting, or they might not actually feel comfortable even engaging with other students in the group. Speaking up can be really difficult because they may not even be able to articulate what it is that they're having difficulty with.

**SERPIL: So, how can schools get better at supporting students who may have a social/emotional disability?**

**Chris Varney.**

**CHRIS:** People with social/emotional disabilities tend to have some very particular sensitivities, some things that really need to be observed to support them in a classroom or school yard.

It might be the way the schedule is arranged on the white board. Making sure that the clear end time of every period of the class is really published so that students know when the, the agony of the class is over. Having structured activities at lunchtime or recess, or making sure the teacher is aware of the different interests the student has.

As soon as you start with a question like, ‘what's some of your interests?’, people open up and you get some of their personality, which is always going to be your biggest strength in supporting them.

Some students with social emotional disabilities can have a very different perception of things. So, it's making sure that you explain school rules or the instructions in diverse ways. So, I'm talking about a multimodal approach.

**SERPIL: And when it comes to the types of adjustments that will benefit students with undiagnosed social/emotional disability – Jane Carmignani says, first and foremost, they need to be personalised.**

**JANE:** They're very much dependent on the individual. So, wherever possible, we're trying to get as much input either from the individual, if they're old enough, in terms of what they might need and what their own goals are, what their own challenges are, what they believe their strengths are, and how we can sort of design any adjustments around those factors.

If they're younger, we’re obviously involving the parents as much as possible, so that we can look at what adjustments might suit them. I think we always have to be really conscious too, particularly with older students, about how much they want some privacy around whatever symptoms they're experiencing.

**SERPIL: Alongside privacy, often environmental and sensory factors need to be considered when teachers are planning adjustments for individual students.**

**For instance, noise can have a big impact.**

**JANE:** For some people, it will be very much about the noise of their environment too, that sort of sensory input. How do we manage that? One thing I'm often suggesting to high school environments is to allow students to listen to music.

So, for some students, with anxiety in particular, having that background noise in their ears can help a lot with their focus. And for others, it might be noise cancelling headphones because they don't like any noise, but they have to drown out all the background noises.

**SERPIL: And movement breaks are often important too, explains Jane.**

**JANE:** We have to remember that kids are either in their fight or flight response or just about to be in it. So, what do we do for these young people to make sure that doesn't happen?

So, movement breaks where they actually either leave the classroom, go for a walk, go wash their face, go get a drink. And that can be sometimes enough just to calm down that fight or flight response that's of hovering in the background.

Sometimes we might involve the whole class in a movement break. And this is the beauty I guess of adjustments, often they benefit lots of children.

We're trying to always trigger that parasympathetic nervous system so that we can keep kids regulated, and at a place where they can learn and be focused and be getting the most out of their day.

**SERPIL: Keeping students’ emotions regulated can also be achieved through a number of other classroom adjustments.**

**A dedicated place for calmness is just one successful example.**

**JANE:** Some of the most effective classroom setups that I've seen are the ones that have what's often called a calming corner, or a calming cave. I remember one teacher had the nest, and it was sort of set up like a big nest, and it was a place where young people could retreat when they were feeling overwhelmed, or when the teacher noticed that they were starting to feel overwhelmed.

And that would be full of all those things that we know help to trigger that parasympathetic nervous system and regulate and calm children. So, that could be anything from some visuals about deep breathing to weighted blankets, to some soft music.

**SERPIL: When making any adjustments, Claire Jackson says it’s essential for teachers to work out what challenge the student is facing and how they can be supported.**

**CLAIRE:** When you don't have that diagnosis, and you don't have any specialist reports to guide you, there's nothing wrong with making some of those adjustments for the student and even using that as a way of determining what might actually be going on. It might actually be that there's an underlying specific learning disability. And then that might then be leading them to become more worried and anxious and stressed.

There's often this overlap and this co-morbidity with disability. There could be different drivers to what you're seeing in the classroom. That's why it's really important for that ongoing monitoring and reviewing of the adjustments, because particularly with social/emotional disabilities they can fluctuate.

So, a student who might be presenting with characteristics of anxiety or depression, they might find the biggest trigger is a new school year. But once adjustments are put in place, they may actually settle in. So, you might find that a student in term one needs a high level of adjustments, but by the time term three comes around, they've actually settled quite well. But then term four, it might start to increase again.

**SERPIL: So, what advice would Claire give to teachers who believe one of their students may have an undiagnosed social/emotional disability?**

**CLAIRE:** Firstly, make some observations, gather some data. So, is it loud noise that's triggering them? Is it crowds of people? Is it that there's a particular person that they're clashing with? So, gather that baseline data. If it's more to do with their engagement with learning, try and work out in what classes they might be showing this. Is it subjects that have a high literacy component?

So, make observations, gather data. Definitely consult with the family, that needs to happen very early on. Make some adjustments. So, work out what might help the student, and then also monitor and review those adjustments.

So, check that what has been put in place is actually effective. And if it's not, try something else and keep trying different things until the teacher can work out what is actually working. But talk to colleagues too.

**SERPIL: There might be times where a student would need learning support – but not because of a disability.**

**Jane Carmignani explains.**

**JANE:** I've had young people that their pet died, and we've had to put in temporary adjustments because of the grief that they’ve experienced with that. Certainly, when there's a family breakdown, a separation, divorce, we might be looking at temporary adjustments for students as they adapt to that.

If we saw over a period of a few weeks, a drop in academic performance, a drop in concentration, but we gradually saw improvement with the support that we were giving, we're less likely to say this is an ongoing disability. If we have done assessments and they haven't actually revealed anything that meets a disability criteria we're just looking at some of the natural highs and lows of young people and teenagers and their development and their natural ups and downs.

**SERPIL: But if schools do decide to impute an undiagnosed social/emotional disability, and want to consult with families, Chris Varney has some tips on how school teams can prepare for that.**

**CHRIS:** The first thing to acknowledge is there is still an enormous amount of shame about having any kind of diagnosed neuro-difference. People are afraid of their child being given that label. So, one thing to counter that is making sure in every interaction that the school has with parents, at parent info nights, in newsletters, in a principal’s welcome message, on your website, that you are embracing learning diversity. That goes a long way in giving parents signals that you're a safe person for them to confide in.

I think discernment is valuable here to discern the parents existing knowledge of diagnoses. The parent might proactively come to you and say, ‘hey, my son/daughter has presented differently since preschool, what do you think?’ And so, that's a different script, when you've got the parent proactively approaching you, because you can assume already that they've got some working knowledge of the labels and diagnoses and that's where you would follow that with validation of ‘yes, I've thought that too. How about we talk about that? First up, I wanted to say, this is a positive thing.’ That's how your script would begin. You would go on to say, ‘we know that many students with the right support achieve really unique things because of the unique processing style that their Autism or ADHD and so on give them.’

It's working out between your teaching team, who is the right person to deliver this. I’d identify who's the teacher that this parent will feel the most comfortable with. I’d then start the script that begins with, ‘we’re loving the character and personality that this kid is showing. We can absolutely see these strengths.’ And then I would follow up with, ‘we've also noticed that there's some things that might be adjusted in the classroom for your child. And we want to talk about what those adjustments could look like.’

Always best to get the parents to talk more. Ask the parents questions. Have you thought about this? And that's going to be the most beneficial discerning where they're at.

**MUSIC**

**CHRIS:** You just need to ask prompting questions and make sure that they leave with this overwhelming sense that you look at every student as a unique achiever.

**MUSIC**

**SERPIL: To have meaningful conversations with families, Chris says schools also need to realise that sometimes parents aren’t always on the same page as each other.**

**That means, the language you use becomes rather important.**

**CHRIS:** Say upfront, ‘it's unusual for both parents to be on the same page about this. We understand the social context and the stigma that's around this. We're just going to give you information and we want to keep having this conversation.’

**SERPIL: And there’s a few more things you can add to your toolbox to be able to effectively speak to families.**

**Claire Jackson says, once you’ve shared your observations about what you’re noticing in the classroom – move onto to ask what families are seeing at home.**

**CLAIRE:** What happens when your child comes home? Are they having a meltdown? Are they overwhelmed? Are they withdrawn? What are you seeing at home? And then establishing whether that's aligning with what the school is seeing. And from there, it's gauging the family's response, knowing that it could be very different. There's no predicting really how a family might respond, but it can vary from absolute relief to resistance and denial.

In these situations, it's better to actually speak to the family rather than put it all in writing. Get on the phone or ask them if they're available to come in for a chat, informally initially. It can be a bit confronting to have a very formal meeting when you're not even at the point of discussing an actual disability.

Having those conversations about, ‘how do you feel if we give this a go.’ Or it might be that you've tried a couple of things already and you can give some feedback. ‘We noticed that your child was doing this, so we did this, and this is how they responded.

How would you feel if we continued to do this or if we now move on to something else?’ It's important to not name any kind of diagnosis, but just indicate that you feel that there might be more going on and that you'd like to see how they respond to adjustments to then determine what steps are next.

At that point, if you feel that they might actually have some undiagnosed disability you'd probably get to the point of having a more formalised meeting. Having that formal meeting where you actually set out some actions and make sure those are minuted. That the family will follow up on seeking out a diagnosis, or that you'll make recommendations for someone who could carry that out.

It's vital to have the student there having those conversations, because they can also be an advocate for themselves and say what they think works. And sometimes what we think works for them isn't necessarily what works. For example, if we believe that they might benefit from having a teacher assistant supporting them, sometimes a teenager might think that that's actually the worst thing possible, you know, to have another adult sitting alongside them.

**SERPIL: That same thinking applies to families as well.**

**Chris Varney says it’s best if families remember that school is part of the wider community.**

**CHRIS:** A lot of students with social emotional disabilities will look one way at school and be completely different at home. And that makes sense because school is a performance for us. When it's over, we're off stage and we're exhausted and we're probably unleashing that exhaustion on our family at home.

You're just the expert on who your kid is. Bring their personality, their strengths to life for the teachers. Put together a bit of a profile on your kid. What their interests are, the characters that they love, the things that they can’t stop talking about and make sure the teacher is aware of that. Because they're all levers for that teacher to leverage in supporting your child and just maintain a positive mantra.

**SERPIL: If a school team believes that a student has an undiagnosed social/emotional disability, the next step is to encourage families to pursue a formal diagnosis.**

**But there could be a number of reasons why a family might not be open to this idea – such as cultural reasons.**

**Claire Jackson says start by reassuring families.**

**CLAIRE:** Try and outline the benefits of having a formal diagnosis. That teachers are professionals, but they're not medical professionals and they would benefit from knowing what a specialist could actually recommend.

**SERPIL: However, schools should never attempt to identify or name a particular disability.**

**JANE:** So, we really want to be able to make sure we use the evidence-based pathways for diagnosis.

I do assessments quite often and trying to consider all the different psychosocial factors, the different presenting behaviours, and really understand what are we dealing with here? What is this reflecting? It takes a lot of time.

It takes a lot of research and exploring all the different behaviours and the different people involved in that child's life. So, we have to be sure. So, we don't want to be making assumptions.

**SERPIL: If at any point, parents are feeling worried about their child’s difference, Chris Varney suggests reminding them that their child has unique strengths.**

**And that conversation may sound something like this.**

**MUSIC**

**CHRIS:** We've noticed your son/daughter has this huge imagination and there's some really bright thinker in these areas.

Some of our most incredible innovators, inventors, problem-solvers in industry credit their achievement due to their processing differences, whether it's Autism or ADHD day or so on.

So, be open-minded. Think big. Have high expectations of your kid. Any label is just a way of helping a school support them. It's not a way to hold them back.

**MUSIC**

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

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

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