



CLAUDIA VERA has crafted this clear and comprehensive advice for teachers with students with disability

All of us are teaching students with varying abilities, including those with disabilities, in our mainstream classes or in specialist settings. This reality has its challenges but we keep at the core of our tale the protagonists of this story – our students, their hopes and needs, their families and their teachers.

Our search for some support begins with the words of Michael Wehemeyer who observes:

“We have taught people with disabilities that they are the problem”.

So we address our shared issues from a point of view of not trying to ‘fix’ the person but instead focusing on their strengths, necessary supports, the surrounding environment and the individual’s interaction with it.

1. Congratulations! Teaching students with disability is a life changing opportunity

School is the prime, consistent environment to provide opportunities for students with disability to develop fundamental life skills, access rigorous and interesting learning experiences, be afforded opportunities to develop and express self-determination, learn about others and themselves and establish relationships.

Whilst this rings true for all young people, as a teacher of a young person with disability you will need to be much more deliberate in ensuring you and the school community create the context, expectations and provide the scaffolds for this to happen. As a result, your actions today will become part of a cumulative pressure, pushing open the floodgates to future experiences and success that will add to the quality of that person’s life.

As a teacher, you will be enriched by developing the capacity to cater instruction for your students, create enabling environments, address and celebrate diversity and be creative and flexible in your approach to teaching.

You matter immensely in their lives and their futures.

2. Personalisation: Your student is the starting point, the path and the destination

“Personalisation is about prizing the person. Personalisation is about knowing the person deeply, having the courage to offer honouring relationships, holding an affirming vision of their life, knowing what is required to make things happen” (Lorna Hanahan, 2013).

The key to realising this personalisation is to know your student and in doing so, aim to understand them. **Having knowledge about their disability is helpful but what carries greater value is knowing the person.** What holds their attention? What opens their curiosity and excites them? What



do they choose to do in their leisure time? What worries them, frustrates them, turns them off? What do they want to know more about, do differently and do better? What matters to them, what talents do they want to share and what bores them?

Try to make sure you not only begin with these questions but re-visit them at various points and be mindful and responsive to changes. This is an important understanding of any individual but its significance for students with disability lies in the limited opportunities they may have in explicitly expressing these nuances about themselves, if they are not actively sought.

Personalisation combines and extends beyond differentiation and individualisation. For a comprehensive explanation of personalisation and how to make this happen in your classroom, read [A step-by-step guide to personalize learning](#). The [Complex learning difficulties and disabilities research](#) project website also provides information on developing meaningful pathways to personalised learning, including [briefing packs](#) on various disorders, conditions and disabilities.

3. Early investment and meaningful planning pays off

To achieve personalisation in a genuine, dignified and fruitful manner takes time. Why not then give yourself licence to invest time early to build rapport with your student, establish a solid relationship with the student's family, refine goals, customise instruction, establish routines, seek broader support and create rich, connected learning experiences. Allow yourself to experiment with your teaching ideas but ensure these are based on what you have learnt about your student, syllabus requirements, good practice and what is manageable in the context of your entire class.

Consider [Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)](#) and use its principles to guide your planning so that adjustments are embedded into a framework that is flexible enough to ensure equality of opportunity for all learners. Inclusive practice is facilitated by UDL, as it allows you to adapt your whole class program for all learners, rather than doing separate plans. Access the [Universal Design for Learning: Theory & Practice](#) website for further information on and practicing UDL. Examples and resources for UDL can be found [here](#). The Department has also developed a web based tool to assist teachers and learning and support teams in profiling the educational needs of students who may benefit from personalised learning and support. The tool is called the [Personalised Learning and Support Signposting Tool](#) (PLASST) and information on the tool can be accessed via the Department's portal by scrolling down to P in the My Applications section.

For those teaching students in support classes in mainstream schools or Schools for Specific Purposes (SSPs), the Individual Education Plan development process is a vehicle for personalised learning. Information to assist this process can be found via the [Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority – Individual Education Plan](#) website. The Queensland Department of Education has published a [booklet](#) outlining the process and developed a presentation to support the writing of [Specific Measurable Attainable Relevant Time bound \(SMART\) goals](#). Access information on Learning Plans in NSW government schools - *Attachment 1*

Seek to be systematic in establishing a cycle of implementation and evaluation but exercise flexibility to adapt where necessary. Once you have clarity and direction, find a way to record this planning that



makes sense and is workable to you but can also be picked up and understood by others. Teaching plans that read well but do not translate to meaningful learning are not worth the files they are saved in. If your programming aids your practice and evaluation, then you are on to a winner – there is no place or need for elaborate fluff. Will this documentation/planning practice help my student learn and help me teach my student? If not, discard.

4. Genuine collaboration and positive relationships are vital

Do a quick relationship audit:

- a) Have you fostered a positive relationship with your student? Have you provided the context, tools and opportunities for your student to develop good social and learning relationships?

The importance of positive relationships in any human interaction is no revolutionary concept. It becomes more significant when you consider the amount of time, access, power, influence and presence a teacher has within a student's existence.

- b) Who else has significant knowledge and understanding of your student? How do you access, communicate and collaborate with these individuals?

Under the [Disability Discrimination Act, 1992](#) via the [Disability Standards for Education, 2005](#) there is a legislated requirement to consult the student, or an associate of the student before making an adjustment. More often than not this will involve the student's parent/carer.

The work of researcher and University of Vermont professor, [Michael Giangreco](#), has a focus on how to plan, adapt, coordinate, implement, and evaluate educational programs and services for students with disabilities. He co-authored a guide to educational planning for students with disabilities [Choosing Outcomes and Accommodations of Children](#) (available with CD-Rom via the Teachers Federation Library), which is based on 25 years of research. Access an interview of the COACH authors where they address the question of [How do you build an educational plan that reflects family priorities and optimizes learning outcomes?](#)

We can learn a wealth of information from those people who know and interact with the student beyond the classroom. Value opportunities for the participation of others and remember that as the teacher you are only one part of the equation of that student's life. Your priorities and goals for the student may not be those of the student or their family. Establishing mutually convenient forums for collaboration, with clear understanding and expectations and shared authority, can strengthen the student's learning, the teacher's instruction, the family's wellbeing and support positive home-school interaction.



5. You are not alone: accessing expertise, resources and services

As the teacher, you are not solely responsible for meeting the needs of your student with disability. It can be a complex and challenging task, particularly when you have the additional needs of multiple students to respond to and you might not have expertise and/or experience in teaching students with disability. Even in the most ideal of scenarios, it is important for teachers to know who they can turn to and where they can access support.

There are the obvious people and structures:

- your supervisor;
- other colleagues (including the student's prior teacher);
- [School Learning Support Officer](#) (role statement can be found in the Department's [Special Education Handbook](#), which also includes information on the role of the School Counsellor and Learning Support Team);
- your principal;
- the Learning and Support Team (the Department has developed professional learning modules under Every Student, Every School of which Module 2 is on Learning and Support Teams. The files (zipped and individual) for this module can be accessed via the Department's intranet under Disability Programs > Every Student, Every School);
- The [Learning and Support Teacher](#) and [Assistant Principal Learning and Support](#) (further information can be found on the [Every Student, Every School](#) section of the Department's website).

Extend your network to include:

- relevant specialist teachers (e.g. ESL teacher, teachers at a nearby School for Specific Purpose);
- the [School Counsellor](#) ;
- Learning and Wellbeing Advisors and Officers in your network (you can access their contact details by logging in to the Department's staff portal and clicking on the Educational Services Contacts Application);
- Community Liaison Officers;
- the Department's Disability, Learning and Support and Work, Health and Safety Directorate (can be accessed via the A-Z on the Department's intranet);
- other Department resources, policies and procedures (listed on their public site under policies) including areas such as Access and Equity and Wellbeing.
- make sure to visit the Department's new [Wellbeing for Schools](#) website, which supports the Wellbeing Framework and has a section dedicated specifically to [supporting students with disability](#) via the 'Succeed' tab.



Also consider:

- the Department's Every Student, Every School professional learning resources (modules accessible via the Department's intranet under Disability Programs > Every Student, Every School and their supported online learning courses for teachers and schools via [OnLine Training](#));
- the Classroom Teacher Program (DEC Intranet Home > A-Z of Directorates > Professional Learning and Leadership Development > Teacher Learning > Classroom Teacher Program);
- [Learning and Support Scholarships](#) ;
- the [NSW Teachers Federation](#), their [Centre for Professional Learning](#) and their [library](#);
- academics at local Universities;
- The [Jill Sherlock Memorial Learning Assistance Library](#) ;
- The [Australian Association of Special Education \(AASE\)](#) ,and,
- other sources of information and professional development, including overseas materials such as [Training materials for teachers of learners with profound and complex learning difficulties](#).

6. Customise instruction, aim high and celebrate often

As teachers we are constantly and sometimes subconsciously adapting our teaching for a diversity of learners - their needs, learning styles, personalities and interests. Students with disability are a very diverse group within themselves and this diversity extends to what extent instruction, content, assessment, equipment and the environment needs to be customised by way of adjustment.

The Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) have excellent, user-friendly resources – accessible via their respective websites – to navigate the personalisation of curriculum, teaching and assessment by way of [adjustments](#) for students with disability.

Link to the following resources:

- [DEC Curriculum Policy Standards](#) ;
- [NSW syllabuses for the Australian curriculum - Special education needs: Curriculum Requirements](#) ;
- [NSW syllabuses for the Australian curriculum - Supporting students with special education needs](#) ;
- [BOSTES -- Making Adjustments: What can I do and where can I find resources?](#) ;
- [Student Diversity and the Australian Curriculum: Advice for principals, schools and teachers](#) ;
- [Australian Curriculum – Students with Disability](#), which includes video [Illustrations of personalised learning](#) .



Resources from other government education departments:

- [SA DEC Educational Support Matrix](#) ;
- [QLD DET Managing Learning for Diversity – Education Adjustments](#) .

Customising teaching and learning experiences should not however be viewed as synonymous with setting low, limited expectations. Remember that making adjustments is about making learning accessible, relevant and ensuring that [assessment](#) is a true reflection of what your student knows.

In planning for instruction it is good practice to ensure that goals are specific, measurable, time-bound and so on. This does not however, eliminate the need to ensure students are encouraged and expected to progress and excel against their own potential. It also does not mean that a student's strengths and weaknesses in one curriculum area are the same across the entire curriculum. This is particularly important when making decisions about whether or not a student should be accessing a [Life Skills](#) syllabus. A student may be unable to meet all mainstream outcomes in one subject area, need minimal adjustments in another area and not require any adjustments in another subject. The most appropriate curriculum options and adjustments should be determined by undertaking a process of [collaborative curriculum planning](#).

Differentiating instruction often involves a process of breaking down the steps needed to reach a particular outcome and addressing each step more explicitly and with greater supports. In light of this, it is important to ensure that successes are acknowledged and celebrated, as it may take a student with disability longer to achieve particular outcomes in comparison to some peers. Be mindful of how often you acknowledge problem behaviour in comparison to positive behaviour, achievements and attempts to improve.

7. Rights and responsibilities: Understanding, protecting and actioning their purpose

Looking at the history of disability legislation in Australia and more broadly, that of anti-discrimination, an important progression from segregation to diversity in relation to people with disability is evident. Anti-discrimination is considered an important driver in promoting equitable access and participation for all. It is critical that rights, as reflected in legislation - such as the [Disability Discrimination Act, 1992 \(DDA\)](#) -- are exercised and protected all the way down to your classroom.

Failing this makes your student vulnerable to discrimination, which may manifest as seemingly insignificant incidents that amount to exclusionary practice and denial of rights over time. More importantly, ignoring or passively addressing student rights could lead to missed opportunities for students to improve the quality and control of their own lives. This is highlighted in the area of curriculum access, in an article of the online publication *The Conversation*, which deals with the issue of a [Separate curriculum for students with disability no good for anyone](#) .



The Department and its schools are considered to be education providers under the [Disability Standards for Education, 2005](#) and as such are required by law to adhere to these standards as minimum standards of practice.

It is important that teachers have a working knowledge of these standards to ensure they are embedding these in their own practice and to actively monitor their implementation by others.

On the Australian Human Rights Commission's website there is information on [Education and disability](#) and a [DDA guide: Getting an education](#).

Teacher familiarity with policy and procedure generally is important to understand the rights and responsibilities your role carries and determining where your role begins and ends. The Department's policies relating to disability, learning and support clearly state that they adhere to disability legislation. In following Departmental policy, you are meeting your obligations under the DDA. [Online training from the University of Canberra](#) is currently available to further enhance your understanding of this legislation and how it applies to your teaching.

Link to the following resources:

- [NSW Department of Education and Communities – Disability Support](#) (this site links to Learning and Support/specialist disability programs, the Department's services locator to find schools with special classes and the Every Student, Every School initiative) ;
- [NSW DEC Schools policies and procedures – Disabilities](#) (including the [Assisted School Travel Program for School Students with Disability Policy](#), [Assisted School Travel Program Guidelines](#), [Assisting Students with Learning Difficulties Policy](#), [Learning and Support Program](#), [People with Disabilities - Statement of Commitment](#) and the [NSW DEC Disability Action Plan 2011-2015](#)) ;
- [Students with Disabilities in Regular Classes](#) ;
- [Nationally Consistent Collection of Data - School Students with Disability](#) .

8. Take stock of your views and practice: Education, disability and your role

Teaching students with disability may challenge the way you view the purpose, outcomes and processes of teaching and education. When you cross paths with individuals whose ability to lead independent and fulfilling lives in their post-school careers, is so closely and evidently connected to what you do as their teacher today, then the significance and power of education is undeniable. In many ways you become the bastion of hope for that child's potential to be realised and their humanity and dreams to be expressed. There is a certain urgency in teaching a child with disability because of the need for so many foundations to be laid, skills developed and opportunities afforded before they leave the consistency and security of their schooling years.



It is why collaboration is essential, transitions are critical and aspiration is vital. Your practice should also fall under scrutiny; if every minute at school is valuable, they must not be wasted on practices that are ill-conceived fads or Band-Aid solutions lacking in any evidence base (see the [Macquarie University Centre for Special Education - MUSEC – Briefings](#) for reviews of interventions for students with disabilities). In so far as they take time away from effective intervention, inappropriate practice could go as far as being harmful to your student.

Improving your ability to teach students with disability automatically broadens your capacity to better facilitate learning for all students. Recognise, reflect and refine. Be thankful for those students with disability who enter your classroom, as they may be your best teacher of all.

Having been a teacher in a School for Specific Purposes, it has been my personal and professional privilege to have taught and learned from our students with disability. I hope that you too are challenged, inspired and developed by your experiences.

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