www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

Host: Carly Boreland
With: Rose Dixon

INTRODUCTION:
You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

Carly Boreland:
Welcome to the JPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the editor of the JPL. Today, I'm talking with Dr. Rose Dixon, and we're talking about teaching students with autism in mainstream classes. Rose, welcome.

Rose Dixon:
Thank you, Carly.

Carly Boreland:
Rose, can you tell us a bit about you and your career and how you came to be specialising in teaching students with autism?

Rose Dixon:
I started teaching in a small country school called The Oaks Public School at the end of the '70s. I was very lucky in those days. I walked out of university into a full-time teaching position. I taught there for two years. I was the Year 1/2 teacher and I had 36 students in my classroom, and they had a huge range of abilities, right from gifted, right down to those students who had mild intellectual disabilities. Because we're a country school, we didn't really have any support staff there at all. My interest in Special Ed. started there because I didn't feel that I had the strategies and the knowledge that I needed to reach all of those students. And right from the start, I thought, "No. We need this extra-special training to actually meet the needs of the special students in these classes." And so therefore, I eventually was given a scholarship by the Department, and I retrained as a master's of education special educator. I then worked in the field of hearing impairment. But in recent years, I've been specialising in the field of students with autism spectrum disorders, both in terms of teaching initial teacher students and in my research.

Carly Boreland:
I've got to ask you. What was the understanding of autism like in the 1970s? Because it seems like something that has really emerged in a significant way in our schools. And I think our understanding has developed significantly as well.

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

Rose Dixon:
Yes. It's been great that it's developed in the 1970s. Because at that time also, we had feminist movement and the women's movement emerging as well. Psychologists actually thought that autism was caused by 'refrigerator mothers'.

Carly Boreland:
Hang on a second. Refrigerated mothers?

Rose Dixon:
Yes, refrigerator mothers.

Carly Boreland:
What is that?

Rose Dixon:
Refrigerator mothers were feminists who obviously did not want to be mothers and wanted to go back to work, and therefore, were not emotionally bonding with their babies. And therefore, this was the cause of autism.

Carly Boreland:
OK. I don't want to over labour this question. So, they were 'refrigerator mothers' because they didn't have time to cook proper meals and they were relying--?

Rose Dixon:
Yes. That was exactly the point at the time. Of course, that didn't last very well, because some very good teachers and some very good researchers got together and realised that that actually wasn't what was happening, and that these kids really had a neurodevelopmental disorder. But basically, until the '70s, we didn't know a lot about autism, and it was the rediscovery of some work that was coming out of Germany and America before the war that was lost because of the war, that we realised that that is what autism was now being much better described by.

Carly Boreland:
So, this was something that people were starting to work on in the maybe '30s and '40s, and then it was kind of put on hold?

Rose Dixon:
It did get put on hold, both Leo Kanner's work and Mr. Asperger's work. He was working in Germany in the '30s. But because of the war, and also because of the danger to identifying people who had disabilities at that time in Germany, he did not publish his work.

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

Carly Boreland:
Rose, you've got me hooked. I'm a high school history teacher, so, you had me at 1970s. But now, I'm really interested. Because you mentioned Asperger's, can you just help us with where Asperger's fits in to discussions about autism, and I suppose, more generally then, why autistic students need these adjustments in mainstream studies?

Rose Dixon:
Yeah. Well, up until 2014, we had a lot of different names and diagnosis in this field. We had Rett syndrome. We had autism spectrum disorders high-functioning. We had Asperger's. We had autism spectrum disorders. We had a whole range of autism spectrum, and it was very hard to know whether all of these diagnoses were related, but they are. So that was replaced at the time. Now, we have autism spectrum disorders which now have level 1, level 2, and level 3. And those levels relate to the needs and to the characteristics. So, there's no longer that-- it all used to be like an umbrella, if you think. All the spokes of an umbrella. It used to have an attachment with different labels, and that's now gone. But one of those labels was Asperger's, and students or children with Asperger's are actually those students who would develop language. They will be educated in regular classes. And these are the ones that we really need, and we will see more and more of them coming through. And that's why we need the strategies. Because even though these students may be considered to be at level 1 now or high-functioning or had Asperger's in previous years, they still have really strong needs for strategies and differentiation.

Carly Boreland:
So, would teachers at school then be expecting to use the language of level 1, level 2, level 3, and for experts who they talk to teachers who are special needs experts to be talking about those level 1, level 2, level 3 as well? Is that what we should be expecting at schools now?

Rose Dixon:
Yes, we should. All of those other terms that we had for maybe 30, 40 years ago, they're supposedly sort of not supposed to be used anymore. You can either use autism spectrum disorders level 1, level 2, level 3, or you can just say autism.

Carly Boreland:
And that's because we're talking about their needs. So, we're saying they're level 1. It's not, "These are all their problems" but "This is what they need."

Rose Dixon:
This is what they need.

Carly Boreland:
Is that the right way to sort of think about it?

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

Rose Dixon:
Yes, yes, yes.

Carly Boreland:
Well then, can you tell me a bit about students at these different levels of the autism spectrum; what do they need?

Rose Dixon:
Ah, very interesting question. Because every individual on the autism spectrum is different. Now, let's unpack this a little bit, why they're so different. And that's why you can't say, "This will work with this particular child or student." This is part of the problem, but it's also part of the diversity, and it's part of the complexity, and some would say the interest of this particular condition. Different levels can occur across sensory needs, like some students with autism-- nearly all students with autism will have some sensory sensitivities. In other words, the way that their sensory system works will be different.

Carly Boreland:
So, it could be sound, but it could be…

Rose Dixon:
It could be visual. It's most likely to be sound, actually. That's one of the most common ones, so that was a good one for you to bring up. It could be sound. It could be taste. It could be touch. It could be balance. It could be every sensory system that we have.

Carly Boreland:
And what's the best way to find out? So, if you're a classroom teacher, "What are we sort thinking?" I'm thinking, "Well, one of the best ways would be talk to the student or talk to the parent."

Rose Dixon:
Would be to look at abnormal reactions to everyday occurrences. However, we have to acknowledge that schools are noisy places, and it's something like a really high noise, like a bell, or even a change symbol. A teacher might be ringing a bell or playing a piece of music, or something like that, to say, "All right. End of activity. Let's change to another activity." You will get an abnormal reaction to that. Like a student will actually put their hands over their ears like it's actually hurting because it is literally hurting.

Carly Boreland:
So, we should pick up by noticing our students, paying attention to what each individual student is doing in the classroom, and these things should become pretty apparent.

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

Rose Dixon:
These sensory issues can create anxiety, and then they can create what we sometimes might want to call a tantrum, a meltdown, and these are difficult to deal with if it gets to that point. So, it's really good to intervene before (to use those powers of observation on the students to intervene before) you get to that point, or to have that knowledge from the parent or a previous staff member.

Carly Boreland:
OK. Great. And so, if we stick with needs, what else can we think about that students are going to need that we might be adjusting for in our regular classrooms?

Rose Dixon:
OK. Well, the other part of the diagnosis…there are a couple of areas of a diagnosis. One is language and communication. And some people say difficulties, and some people say differences. So, let's stick with differences. But there are definitely differences here, and this is one of the areas that relate to a diagnosis. Those students who have some areas here will interpret language differently or they'll use language differently. They may not get jokes. They may not understand that language can be used in an abstract way, or to convey emotions, or that certain words will have more than one meaning. It might actually be quite irritating to a student with autism that words actually do have more than one meaning, and they'll find that confusing and complain about it.

Carly Boreland:
So, we're in class. Say we're doing English or something like that. We would be so interested in that and want to explore and study and play with those words, and that's the kind of thing that makes us fascinated by the world of words. That, to some students, could be really problematic.

Rose Dixon:
Yes. They will find that confusing, maybe irritating, and it makes them feel insecure. I've actually known some students with autism who will say, "I prefer maths because I prefer the language of maths," because it's much more structured. And usually, the meaning is much more stable.

Carly Boreland:
And so how can we help? Because one of the things I'm thinking about when I listen to-- and when I think about teaching students with special needs, is we often think of this as a problem that needs to be somehow managed by the teacher. And I think that's not really a helpful way to think about it because it means that you go to school preparing for a bad day every day. What's a way that you can get around that, or that you can make that work in a way that makes it a positive experience?

Rose Dixon:
Well, let's think about differences rather than disabilities, particularly with language. You might actually want to plan ahead and actually sort of have some word walls or some explanations about what word

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

meanings are. Probably not have as many as what you might want to think, but actually cut it down a little bit so that you're not overwhelming the student with autism. It doesn't mean that they can't learn these things. It just means that they need these extra supports, like visual supports. Visuals is the way to go in virtually every area of difference because students on the autism spectrum learn 90% through visuals rather than through language. And therefore, any visual support that you can give them is, one, going to give them a good day, and going to give you a good day too. However, the great thing about that is -- I think we've always underestimated, as teachers, how much visuals support all of our students.

Carly Boreland:
And this is such a common thing that comes up in so many discussions of what works for students with special needs or students who might have a background language, or students who come from a different cultural background. What works for them works for everyone.

Rose Dixon:
Yeah. And that, to me, is the real strength here. Visuals actually work for everybody. And now that we've all got computers and everything in the classrooms and that, they're really not hard to develop.

Carly Boreland:
And I'm assuming that when you say visuals, you don't mean like beautiful wallpaper that just gets stuck on a wall. You have to actually teach the students how to use it.

Rose Dixon:
You have to teach the students what the function of it is. But the other thing that you really need to be aware of is having a fairly-structured classroom environment. I don't mean boring. I don't mean not student-centered. We're there for students. We're not there to just get through the day with as less stress as possible. The students with autism really respond to structure. They need to know what the timetable is for the day. They can't always predict what's going to be happening in the day, and this causes them anxiety. However, this is also a good classroom teaching technique for most kids -- it doesn't mean that it has to be totally 100% rigid. It just means that if there are going to be changes, you need to give sufficient warning to your student. But it's still a benefit. And frankly, it can be a benefit for you, that you know what's going to be happening in that day when you walk in the classroom.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE/ANNOUNCEMENT:
The Centre for Professional Learning offers a wide range of professional learning opportunities all around New South Wales at a fixed rate for members of the New South Wales Teachers Federation. For course information, dates, location, and registration information, visit cpl.asn.au

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

Carly Boreland:
So, Rose, so far, we've talked about some of the things that are going to be typically demonstrated with students who are on the autism spectrum, and we've talked about sensory need and language communication. And can you tell us about some of the other ones?

Rose Dixon:
Yes. There's a really big one, and that's social skills and behaviour. What we need to do here is we really need to actively teach social skills. Again, this isn't going to hurt our other kids either. Because we make huge assumptions, I think, as teachers about the fact that our students will come to class knowing how they should behave. They should know how to line up. They should know how to sit. They should know that there is an inside voice and there's an outside voice. They should know these actual-- there's a word for this, and it's called the hidden curriculum. And it's hidden because we don't teach it.

Carly Boreland:
Yeah. So, they will know those things if we teach them. And we can't assume that there's some other more noble, better teacher than us out there doing it on our behalf. We have to teach it in our classroom every day.

Rose Dixon:
Or that five-year-olds will come to school knowing those things. Some of them will. Probably at least half. But to a child with autism, this is a real area of difficulty. Again, a real area of difference, if you want to think about it like that. But this is the one that will probably cause you the most problem. As a teacher, you're probably quite good at differentiating the language communication curriculum. You may be quite good at developing an autism-friendly environment within your classroom. This is the one that's going to cause the most stress. The problem is that they actually don't pick up their social knowledge through observational learning, which is what a lot of kids will. They'll look at parents. They'll look at the adults in their life. They'll look at the other kids in their life, and they'll pick up a lot. Sort of like osmosis. They're so like sponges.

Carly Boreland:
Kind of like language acquisition or something like that.

Rose Dixon:
Yes, like that. And they'll acquire their social skills in a very similar way. Because most five-year-olds have quite sophisticated language, and they go from naught to ten, that's an amazing thing. Kids with autism don't pick up their social skills in the same way. They have to be actively taught and reinforced. The fourth area that is part of the diagnosis is restricted and repetitive interests. There, you have two ways of dealing with these. I had one student whose fascination was embryos. He knew everything about embryos that there was to know about embryos. More common ones are Thomas the Tank, dinosaurs…

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

Carly Boreland:
So like age-appropriate kind of…?

Rose Dixon:
They can be very age-appropriate. But the fascination is deeper, and the student becomes very narrowly focused. So, there's two ways of dealing with this. One is, you see that as a way into their world, and you use that as a reinforcement, or you use it a reward. So, "Please come over here and do some maths with me, and then we can talk about dinosaurs." The other age-appropriate things move forward throughout the life span, and one that you'll often find is anything to do with computers. The fascinations are individual and they're very hard to predict, but there's very little you can do about them.

Carly Boreland:
And even as we're talking, it goes from this kind of initial thing of, "Oh, there's going to be this problematic reaction," and, "How am I going to do--" and now, we're sort of talking about how you actually really get to know the student and what they're into, and you get to know so much about them. And I can imagine, that must be-- if you can see it that way, it becomes rewarding in itself because you get to really know this person.

Rose Dixon:
Yes, you do. And this person, I like to think about as fascinating. There are other more negative words. But I like to think, this is a human being who has a slightly different perspective on the world, and I find that really interesting rather than odd or quirky, or there are some other better words. Fascinating, interesting, and different.

Carly Boreland:
And I suppose then there's this other thing about, how do you incorporate the special needs of lots of students? Because you might have, in any one mainstream classroom now, one student who's on an autism spectrum, but then you might have other-- physical disabilities, all kinds of other things. So, what are some things you can do to create a classroom environment that has this sense of fascination, of interest, of wanting to know and care about the students as well?

Rose Dixon:
Well, what I think you really need to concentrate on is the needs of your students, perhaps rather than the diagnosis. Because if you just look at the diagnosis, you're going say, "I can't meet all the students' needs." But let's look on their needs for their learning. So, we concentrate on that, to start with, and then look at the evidence-based strategies that we know actually work. And you'll probably find that there's commonalities across these, and therefore, that's what you should be looking at rather than trying to meet all the individual needs that is not sustainable in any shape or form. But the other thing you also need to do is-- I'm quite a supporter of Universal Design for Learning. That, to me, is-- if we can have that working on a whole school basis, it's harder for a teacher to implement this on their own.

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

So therefore, this has to be a school-wide approach because it's a new way of thinking. One way of meeting the needs of all of the students without having to be at school at 6 o'clock in the morning and not leaving till 6 o'clock in the afternoon, and then going home to prepare some more visuals.

Carly Boreland:
Yes. And we're not advocating worksheets and visuals for every single kid individually made, or this kind of stuff, because it's just not realistic or good pedagogy.

Rose Dixon:
The other area I quite like is looking at Carol Tomlinson's differentiation framework, and I think that works as well in association with UDL. Even Tomlinson talks about the fact that in one semester, you can change two things. And then the next semester, you change another two things.

Carly Boreland:
And why so slowly like that? What's the thinking?

Rose Dixon:
What you start with, you're going to be putting more into preparation. But once you've actually done that level of preparation and you've mastered that strategy, then the next semester, those strategies will still be there, but you'll be adding another two, and then you'll have four. And then the next semester, you'll still have those four, and then you'll be adding another one. So, you'll have six. So, it's not like there's a compounding benefit from doing it that way.

Carly Boreland:
And it gives you time, so it's manageable for you because you have time to try these things out, actually talk to somebody about how to do it properly, and the kids are getting a benefit all the time along the way.

Rose Dixon:
All the time.

Carly Boreland:
Probably at a rate they can handle as well. Is there such a thing as too much adjustment? Is that a possibility?

Rose Dixon:
Yes. You don't want to go back to the chaos of 1970s, which nobody could sustain. And every good teacher just went, "Yeah. Well, let's just move on, please."

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

Carly Boreland:
So if you're a teacher and you've got a primary school class or a high school class, either you find out you're allocation at the beginning of the year, and you're aware you've got a student in your class who's on the autism spectrum, maybe you're lucky and you know that they're level 1 or level 2 or level 3, but maybe you don't, what's the approach that you take with that kind of situation in terms of your own preparation and who you get help from or what you sort of do?

Rose Dixon:
OK. So, every school should have a LaST, and they should have a learning support team. So, I would say they would be the people that you go to first. They may or may not have the expertise in this particular area. So, you then need to start, perhaps, adding to your own expertise in this area with professional learning. But I have to admit, there's some very good, shall we say, materials on the web. There's also some very poor ones. So, what you have to become is a connoisseur, if you like, of what's good and what's bad. Autism does attract the snake oil salespeople--

Carly Boreland:
I can imagine.

Rose Dixon:
…if I can put it like that. The people who are saying, "We will cure your child of autism."

Carly Boreland:
And that would be appealing to desperate parents or--

Rose Dixon:
Oh, of course. Yeah. And why wouldn't they? Why wouldn't they try to investigate that perhaps, if they thought. Let's just state right now, there is no cure for autism. It is a developmental disorder, which means that it's a lifelong disorder. The doesn't mean, though, that we can't create autism-friendly environments where people with autism can grow and flourish, and that's what we're aiming for in our schools. So, the LaST, the learning support team. Perhaps if there is a previous staff member who has experience with the student, or an SLSI who has experience with the student as well. So, access, perhaps, the information that's available right near where you are, to start with. The other people you should really also be asking are the parents. Parents are, I think, the best experts when it comes to their children, and they will have had years of experience with this particular individual. Some of it positive, some of it negative. They should be involved, right from the start, in a collaborative way, and their views should be respected.

Carly Boreland:
And so, you've done those few steps. So, you've talked to your learning support team, and you've spoken to the parents, and you found out that the learning support team doesn't really have this

expertise in this area. Is that the point where then you're just on your own and on the internet surfing around looking for help? Or what else can we--?

Rose Dixon:
You may be able contact some of the autism-specific bodies. The one we have in New South Wales is called Aspect, and they have a wealth of information that is worth accessing. And they also have visiting teacher situation that they may be able to offer help through as well. The other thing is, you probably do have autism advisers within the department, and I think that the ones that I'm familiar with are absolutely expert. And there are certain people who have set up autism-specific classes and things like that.

Carly Boreland:
So, we shouldn't feel like we're alone.

Rose Dixon:
Not at all. No.

Carly Boreland:
Rose, there's a lot of information in the media at the moment about autism, particularly, it's sort of a little bit of an on-trend disability if that-- I don't mean that crudely, but I just mean it gets a lot of attention. Could you help us with understanding how that sometimes maybe generate stereotypes or influences our own thinking in ways that maybe are unhelpful or--?

Rose Dixon:
So, a lot of people feel that people with autism shouldn't be in the inclusive classroom. They shouldn't be going to regular schools. They should be in special schools, and a lot of teachers actually feel that their needs should be met there. However, the reality is that the great majority of children with autism are enrolled in regular schools, and they actually can access the curriculum. So, in a way, what we need is-- there are programs that are available. These can be run from Aspect. They're called The Sixth Sense Program, and what they do is-- they're like a program that helps explain autism to both teachers and to students. They've really been shown to be very helpful when it comes to acceptance and relationship-building and understanding of this condition. So, if we could get those sort of programs into the schools, then I think that could really help change some of these very negative attitudes.

Carly Boreland:
So that could be something that, if you were talking about a community or practise, that the teachers together could have a look at that, or possibly, an opportunity for a school development event?

Rose Dixon:
Event. Yeah.

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

Carly Boreland:
And what about students at school like their peers, and making friends, and that kind of thing? Are there useful things around building social relationships and having friends in that kind of thing?

Rose Dixon:
There are actually programs you can actually use as part of your social school-building repertoire, and they can be really useful as well. And they really do have quite a strong impact because it is hard for students with autism, sometimes, to make friends. It's not that they don't want to make friends. It's that they often do it inappropriately because of the social school problems or differences that they've had.

Carly Boreland:
I just want to ask you one more question, Rose, and that's about gender and autism spectrum. A lot of the examples you were using are boys, and that's typically what we sort of hear about and notice. Are there more boys who have autism spectrum disorders than girls? Or is it 50/50 and we're just not noticing the girls? What's the reality?

Rose Dixon:
Reality is that it's 4:1 boys, 4:1 girls. I think you're right in that we probably are missing the diagnosis for some of the girls because they're quieter. Also, girls are better at language in the early years and may not show some of the acting-out behaviours. But honestly, worldwide, it's 4:1. So I would say, definitely.

Carly Boreland:
Yeah, yeah. So, it's not like we need to go hunting for these missing girls or something like that.

Rose Dixon:
Probably be a little more aware, but no.

Carly Boreland:
Rose, when we started, I was talking about you as a young teacher in the 1970s, and we've come a long way, not only with time, but also with our understanding of autism. And you've mentioned some key milestones and points in time there, such as 2014, where our language that we're using to talk about autism has changed. But you've also talked to us about some really key things that all teachers can look out for and then some actions that we could take. So, to summarise what I think you're saying we should be looking for, and this is for K to 12, is looking at students as-- their learning needs as opposed to their medical diagnosis. And then from that point of addressing student need, to look at ways that we can notice and intervene around sensory needs and looking for abnormal reactions, to look at language and communication, and work out ways that we can use visual stimulus and appropriate word walls and structured environments to assist students to communicate more effectively and to understand as well, to really look at actively teaching social skills and appropriate behaviours, and we

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

can use social narratives to be able to do some of that teaching as well, making sure that they're very specific to the particular student and their needs, and then to become interested in and know how to use, to our advantage, the restricted and repetitive interests that students might have, and that can be either by reinforcing and finding way in through their interests, or also to use those as rewards so that we can have a little bit of give and a little bit of take from our students.

I think the main message from you is that each student is different on the autism spectrum, and that we need to make sure that we understand that student. And so, if our first thing that we're trying to do, when we have a student, is understand that student, that can be by talking to parents and using our existing school learning support team to find out and prepare for us to be the teacher of that student. And then from there, we have to do a bit of the hard work of upscaling ourselves and using quality resources to do that. And then also, reaching out to autism-specific support. And that should be through the Department of Education, but there's also some other really good organisations that we could use. And then work together with our colleagues to make a plan, I guess, for the next year as well. Does that sound about right?

Rose Dixon:
That sounds absolutely wonderful, actually. Yes. So, let's see that we can pull this off.

Carly Boreland:
Thank you, Rose, and we really appreciate having you here.

Rose Dixon:
It's been my pleasure.

Carly Boreland:
You've been listening to the JPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the editor of the JPL. I've been speaking with Dr. Rose Dixon about teaching students on the autism spectrum in our mainstream classrooms. And to find out more and to listen to further podcasts, you could visit our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts.

CONCLUSION:
The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teachers Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those of the individual speakers and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations.

Dr. Roselyn Dixon **has been a special education teacher in primary and high school schools and a research academic involved with Inclusive Education for over 25 years. She has published papers in the**

www.cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CPL Podcast: Autism K-12

fields of social skills and behavioural interventions for people with a range of disabilities including students with Oppositional Defiance Disorders and Autism Spectrum Disorders

More recently she has been actively involved in examining the relationship between digital technologies and pedagogy in special education and inclusive classrooms for students with AutismSpectrum Disorders and the implications of the NDIS on people with disabilities in rural and remote communities. She has also published chapters and co-edited an International Handbook of research relating to Education and the Law.

She is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Education, University of Wollongong, where she is the Academic Director of Inclusive and Special Education.