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CPL Podcast: Anxiety & Supporting Students with Disability K-12

Host: Carly Boreland
With: Rose Dixon

INTRODUCTION:
You're listening to the CPL podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning.

Carly Boreland: Welcome to the CPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Carly Boreland and I'm the Assistant Director of the CPL. Today I'm talking with Rose Dixon and were talking about anxiety. How you can support your students with special needs and their anxiety in primary school and high school, K-12. Rose, welcome.

Rose Dixon: Thank you very much, Carly. It's great to be here.

Carly: We should say welcome back, Rose, because we've done a really popular interview with you previously on students with autism spectrum. We're so glad to have you back here and to get your insights into what we can do to support students with a range of different special needs in our schools.

Rose: It's my pleasure.

Carly: Anxiety is something that people would experience in all kinds of ways in their life, not only in their school days. Can you tell us a little bit, about what you think teachers should know about anxiety in general? Then, we will talk more about students with special needs, especially.

Rose: Anxiety disorders are one of the most common difficulties facing children and adolescents. Anxiety is based on a physiological response, like the fight and flight response that we have. All of us will feel anxiety at some time. It's a physiological thing of being part of a human being.

Carly: That's normal.

Rose: That is normal. What isn't is when anxiety can become so severe, and it may not even relate to anything that's happening in real life. It may be happening just within the person's perception. If that happens, then that's probably an anxiety disorder. You can tell if it's a disorder by a few things. It will manifest either as avoidance of just normal daily activities, what would be perceived, or normal age-appropriate activities or the other one and this is the one that teachers may be more aware of because it's harder to ignore, or harder not to notice is when it becomes like an overwhelming desire to escape the situation.

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Which again, might not be perceived as threatening by anyone else, or any other student, but leads to this overwhelming desire to escape and this can be manifested as a tantrum, as a sort of challenging behavior, or running away. Therefore, it's often easy for all of us, but teachers as well to misread that challenging behaviour and not realise that it's actually based on an anxiety reaction to a situation.

Carly: Okay, so you might be just thinking that's a naughty child or something like that when actually they're panicked.

Rose: They're panicking. Yes, they've gone to the panic stage. They've gone to what we call the red zone. Once they're in the red zone, they will have to either withdraw severely, which might mean sitting under a table or rocking in the corner, or they may actually take off. They may run away. The thing to remember is that this is something that's happening within this actual student. It's not a result usually, of anything that the teacher has done. It can be just endemic to that student, not exogenous. Of course, we can do things to change the environment that will make it less likely to happen, but we'll get to that later.

Now, if it's a disorder, you can usually tell by the fact that it's interfering with the child's ability to function and do things that would be expected of their age. It's also their behavior is probably not age appropriate. Like you would expect, perhaps a two-year-old child who is having their first day in daycare to show some distress when their primary caregiver left.

Carly: Yes, I know all about that.

Rose: You might also expect the five-year-old child at their first day at school, to show some distress. However, if that's still happening when they're 10 that is not what we will consider an age-appropriate behaviour. Those are the sorts of, I guess, flags, if you like, that it might be disorder.

Carly: There's a range of normal behavior and then outside of that range is what we're looking at.

Rose: The other thing is you might want to look out for change in behavior as well, like a change in habits. Like a student who was very willing to come to school every day, suddenly starts school refusal or something like that. That change should be noted and is probably coming from anxiety, rather than anything else. Just so we all realise how serious this is, even the way that the person feels how they feel physiologically inside can vary as well. Some people can have a racing heartbeat. Some people can have very rapid breathing. Some people can be teary, irritable, but a constant butterflies in the stomach, which means they're probably feeling nauseous as well. They had some pains and discomfort in their body. All of those can be manifestations of anxiety. These disorders can come in different places like there's generalised anxiety that's excessive worry about everything and anything. Then you've got social

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anxiety which is the fear of doing something wrong and of been criticised. Separation anxiety is as we said, it's normal behavior at certain stages of our development.

Phobias are part of anxiety disorder as well. These can be weird and wonderful. I personally love dogs. Some people are very frightened of dogs or they're very frightened of heights. I had one particular child who was very hard to get into the classroom. Once he was inside the classroom, he was fine. It took us a while to finally work out there was actually the metal strip that was his phobia.

Carly: Oh, that's so specific.

Rose: Yes, I know. I know. All we had to do was cover that middle strip and the tantrum disappeared.

Carly: Can I ask, how did you find that out?

Rose: Observation, functional behavioral assessment technique that is supported by the department. What we did was we had to get another staff member to stop teaching and just examine and observe what was happening. She noticed that the child got a fear reaction when he actually saw the metal strip. If you're teaching, it's very hard to be observing one particular individual child's maybe minuscule eye gaze. It was that eye gaze of looking down and the fear response that gave the other adult the opportunity to say, "Look, I think that's the metal strip." How weird is that? It is that phobias are weird and wonderful. There is no logical rationale for why some people don't like birds or whatever else it is that you might not like.

Carly: That's so hard because I think humans are generally programmed to look for reasons for behavior and to try to understand. Especially teachers have a natural inquiring kind of inclination I think, or we hope they do.

Rose: We sometimes try to think, "Well, there must be a reason why this particular child is even panicked about just seeing this particular object." I think we just have to realise that a lot of phobias are just individual. It is a bit of detective work needed to find out what it is.

Carly: It really shows too the benefits of having an attitude of being open to observation in general and working with your peers. Not feeling that it always has to be, or it hopefully is never with a clipboard and a kind of supervisory assessment, but a more general, "Can you please come and have a look at what's going on in here?" I trust your opinion and I would like…

Rose: That sort of functional behavioral assessment is a really great technique for teachers to use. I would suggest all teachers become familiar with that. The only thing that is the issue is that you need a teaching colleague to come and do it for you. Which means you've got to be open to another teacher

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observing you. That was never a problem for me, but I know some teachers do get a bit nervous if someone is in their classroom.

Carly: If anxiety is part of everyone's everyday life to some normal degree, what kind of proportion of our students might have anxiety disorder? What might we be typically expecting?

Rose: It's a really interesting question and I'm going to give you the stats. These may vary over different cultures and over a different set of countries. I'm going to give you what I think are pretty close. For the general population of high school students worldwide we think it's about 7%. But of those, 5% of that 7% will acknowledge the disorder but will not seek any treatment. They may do other things like withdrawal from school or act out or there's a whole range of reactions.

They won't be given counseling treatment about anxiety as such. 2% of that 7% will seek treatment for anxiety. Anxiety becomes more severe over the lifespan so that there are children who exhibit anxiety like 5 to 12 but becomes more obvious from 12 to 18.

Carly: Okay. What's that about?

Rose: I think that's about adolescence. I think that's about the worry about how we see ourselves. How other people see us becomes much more important, I think for adolescents. That's one of the descriptors that's an example of social anxiety disorder. I think a lot of adolescents go through that questioning time.

Carly: It's just becoming more independent from your parents, that safety net.

Rose: That safety net is-you're moving your focus from your family into your peer group. Let's face it, a lot of peer groups aren't anywhere as nice and loving and caring and supportive as what your parents are.

Carly: No. Absolutely not.

Rose: Other statistics that are, I guess, very relevant to me in my work are that students with special needs have much higher levels of anxiety disorder, particularly in the school setting. Students with intellectual disability and students with ADHD are testing out at having 25% of them will have an anxiety disorder.

Carly: Wow.

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Rose: Then the very high percentage is students with autism. They're going from 40% to about 50% of anxiety. Now, this is part of their condition, but it also increases in adolescence. Part of it has to do with the fact, again, that they're becoming more aware that they are quite different. They find it very hard sometimes to fit into social groups and be accepted within the school setting. Again, they're moving away from the family, the supportive nurturant family into the big brave world of adolescents and high school and things like that.

Carly: Sometimes I think there can be a bit of a stereotype that people with disabilities are just out there doing their own thing. They're not really aware that they're different or that there is a difference. From what you're saying, it sounds a little bit more like there's a heightened self-awareness sometimes, or?

Rose: There is actually, particularly people with autism, but even people with disabilities. They're very aware of the negative stereotypes. They're very aware of the stigma that they're exposed to and social rejection.

Carly: I'd really like to talk about what we can do at school to help with that. It seems like something that schools, in general, are so good at trying to make people included. We should be able to do that really well.

Rose: I think you've got the push-pull factor of that every adolescent wants to be popular and be accepted. Therefore, they can be quite choosy about who they will communicate with or involve in their friendship group. They don't want to be seen as anything different either. They don't want to get embarrassed. There is stigma in our society about difference. I think it really comes out in adolescents. Adults, I think, particularly in countries like Australia, adults have become much more accepting, much more willing to look at diversity. I still think there's quite a lot of lack of acceptance in some areas. I think we really do need to work on it.

Carly: It sounds like high school especially; it just sounds like a bit of a pressure cooker. So much pressure on students, but we're hearing about parents at times. It just feels like there's too much anxiety everywhere.

Rose: Too much anxiety, yes. Then you've also got the individual factor of these people who are maturing and growing and going through physiological changes as well. That's impacting as well on the situation. It's not just an external thing. It's an internal thing.

Carly: What else?

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Rose: Well, I guess what I'd like to talk about is now moving into particularly why this issue is so important for children with special needs, all of them. It's because honestly, the bottom line here is that if you've got an anxiety disorder, you're going to find learning very, very difficult. It doesn't matter even if you have no cognitive or sensory impairment at all. Your anxiety disorder will interfere your cognitive functioning. You literally can't pay attention to it because you're actually, your limbic system is using all your energy just to keep you functioning in that state. It's very hard to process information, you can't really organise it, and you can't retrieve it.

In other words, it depresses a whole lot of cognitive functions, not just the ability to listen and take in information, comprehend information. Given that, for some students with special needs, cognitive functions are compromised anyway, in certain ways. If you then put in anxiety disorder on top of that, learning is going to be depressed. In terms of being in a school and it's important for teachers to recognise this, "Unless we deal with the anxiety disorder, we won't be able to really help these students that well."

Carly: It's like step one in your pedagogical approach.

Rose: Yes. There are some indicators because not all kids will come with a diagnosis.

Carly: No, no and not all families are capable of arranging that for their children either.

Rose: It's true. Let's look at what an individual teacher could look at. These are some of the signs you might want to look at. The good things about some of these signs is that these happen before you get either the severe withdrawal or the severe blowout, whichever way that it looks like for that particular student.

Carly: It might be possible that that happens with all of the best planning and intention. We ourselves are going to need to be resilient about that and say, "Okay, let's try again."

Rose: Yes, that's what you do. You have a blank slate. The end of the day, you start the next day with a blank slate. You can just say, "Look, it wasn't me. It wasn't you." I've got this lovely idea called the Red Beast. I just call it the Red Beast. It was the Red Beast. Sorry, the Red Beast was here yesterday."

Carly: That guy is too much trouble.

Rose: There are some indicators though. People who usually have anxiety are going to give you some indication. It's our job as teaching professionals to actually know what those triggers are. I consider it as a duty of care issue actually that you should know what the triggers are for your-- It's actually a duty of care for yourself because if you can step in when you're seeing a trigger and then you're seeing what I

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call the rumbling stage, where it's obvious someone's physiological state is changing, you can intervene then.

You can actually preserve that student in the classroom. You can preserve your own well-being as well. These are some of the indicators, restlessness. Somebody who's actually jumping around or making multiple trips to the back of the room and then coming down or--

Carly: Oh, yes, we know those students.

Rose: Rocking on the chair.

Carly: "I just need to get something."

Rose: "Yes, yes, I just can't." That's because the cognition's not working. They're not settled. They're not ready to learn because of something. Concentration problems. School refusal is an obvious one. Also, some students may be excessively seeking reassurance. In other words, the direction might've been very clear, "Get out your math book. Pick up your pencil and start at number one." Well, that's a very clear direction and most students will go, "Yes, yes, I can do that."

Then a student who comes up to you after you've given a very clear and repeated direction, "Uh, I don't know what to do." That could be an anxiety reaction. Frequent stomach aches. Students who are very into perfectionism or procrastination. They can't get started on something because they're having to deal with their anxiety before they can actually-- "I can't do this." "Oh, I'm dumb." "Oh, no, I can't do this." "Oh, I'm going to get into trouble." "Oh, I'm going to get criticised."

That's what's happening with procrastination. There are all of those thoughts are happening and not stopping. The other thing might be unexplained headaches or avoiding group work. Now, some students really don't like group work, others thrive in it. Just think about what your job is, is to me is to intervene, know what the trigger is, and then intervene when the rumbling starts. That's why you have to know your students very well. It's not your fault if you miss it.

Carly: Yes. Yes, because you also don't want to creep them out by over--

Rose: What do you- I've got my eye on you.

Carly: Then you're the anxious one as well.

Rose: Yes.

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Carly: You can try to keep it calm.

Rose: The best thing probably is to develop shall we say, particularly for kids with special needs is a very calm, a very organised, and a very predictable classroom.

Carly: Well, Rose, I love that. You would meet so many of my old students who are like, "Oh yes, we know all about it."

Rose: Now, some people say to me, "I'm a creative teacher. I like to go with the flow. I like the teachable moment." I'm going, "That's fine, but keep those times, even make that predictable, if you need to do that." If you need to have children growing towards the sun like sunflowers, and we're just going to have a little bit of nice music, and you can do whatever you feel like this afternoon.

Carly: No, of course, That sounds like free time.

Rose: Free time. Yes, free time.

Carly: Who invented that idea?

Rose: Well, I started out thinking that I was going to be like that. I very quickly changed. The first thing I think you need to do is get to know your students and know the trigger and then know what the rumbling stage looks like for those students. Believe me, it's worth putting this time in because you really don't want to put up with that tantrum, all the running away, that gets serious.

Carly: Yes. You've got the added problem of, "Well, are they? Now what?"

Rose: You can't go. You've got to call executive the minute that that happens. You don't really want it to get like that. Then if you think that this child does have an anxiety disorder, it's probably very worthwhile for exploring some of the free resources that are really available. I've checked on some ones that I think are quite good. One is "*Kids Matter"* has a lot of resources. "*The Black Dog Institute"* has a range of resources that are made for schools, particularly secondary schools. If you're interested in looking at resilience, then there's resources called "*Friends Resilience"*.

Their programs go right from young children like preschool right up to adults and "*Bounce Back*" as well. *"Bounce Back"* is a comprehensive program. There are four good places to start on. I'm not saying that you use everything, but what I'm saying is if you need some ideas about activities. I have a fifth one, "*The Center for Emotional Health",* they have a range of programs. However, before you get there, there's some very simple things any teacher can do to start. This goes back again to the calm, predictable, organised classroom is advanced notice of any casual teachers or other changes in routines.

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Carly: I'm so glad you said that. That's on my list of questions.

Rose: Give notice of transitions both within the teaching session and to recess and lunch or to library or to any change of activity. You should also help the student. If they're in that rumbling stage, you can intervene then. You don't have to have this formalised program. Have some self-calming strategy that maybe even the teacher themselves use and can actually model for the student. I like taking deep breaths. I just go, "Okay, now we all need to take three breaths. Stop everybody. Right here we go. We all need oxygen." It's not targeting the child. It's not stigmatising the child. It's just saying everybody in a while can need oxygen.

But you can actually have a self-calming strategy for the student as well. The other thing you might have is a self-calming toy or something from home. High school students, I know have been given fiddle toys. They're not going to bring a toy in from home, but something that is quite private. They might even just have it inside their hand.

Carly: As they get older, you teach them the appropriate ways they are going to--.

Rose: Yes. To use that. You also can teach them the appropriate way to use a "*take a break card*." Again, this has to be under a duty of care. A break space could be in your classroom or it could be a veranda or just something like that. That's often enough to calm somebody down who's in that rumbling stage if they've already started. The other thing I always think of is if somebody is anxious get them to sit near a door.

Carly: Yes.

I remember always telling new teachers and practitioners, "There'll be a student, you're going to want them near the door, make that seat available or do a sitting plan that puts them there." Everyone is happy.

Rose: That is not stigmatising. That is meeting that student's needs. Honestly, some of these techniques are so easy. You don't even have to access the online resources to know how to do this. You can just do this every day. The other thing you can is helping the person think a bit more positive. One of the things with anxiety is that some students catastrophise. In other words, "Everything bad happens to me."

They get into that negative mindset. One way of helping them with that is to say, "What are you grateful for?" and not sink into the negative mindset. I had one student who was very hard to get out on the, well, it wouldn't be on sort of glass half full and was always negative.

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Carly: About themselves?

Rose: Yes, and about other people as well. They started becoming critical of other people as well and everything become a catastrophe. We worked very hard with that particular student on saying, "Okay, all right, all these perhaps bad, no, not bad, but things that concerned you happened. What's that something that didn't concern you?" When we started, there'd be two things on there, then we gradually increased the number of things. To get out of that mindset, it's not going to happen just like snap if you've got a gratitude journal.

Carly: When you're doing things like that, it's not when everything's falling apart in the middle of- No. You're not calling out across the room. Maybe it's obvious, but sometimes you get caught up in the moment.

Rose: Every teacher gets caught in the moment. If you're calm, organised, predictable, I'm assuming you're going to have less of those moments. You're not responsible for what happened in the morning before they came to school. You're not responsible for what happened in the playground. Some of those can cause real difficulties for you. What you need to know, what you need to be aware of, if you lose it or if you raise your voice or something like that, the world's not going to fall apart either and that's behavior that you need to model as well, that you don't need to be perfect. Teachers don't need to be perfect. I reckon about 85% of the time you need to be perfect, the other 15% I reckon you're fine.

Carly: You've got a bit of space to move.

Rose: You've got wriggle room.

Carly: I remember doing one of those discussions after the lesson with the student and we were going through-- Then what happened is, "Okay, and what did you do?" "This." "Then what happened?" The student said, "Then you lost it." That's right. That is what happens.

Rose: That can be very honest.

Carly: We don't want that.

Rose: What we have to do is build teachers' resilience too if that happens and it will happen occasionally, is that they can say, "Hang on. 85% of the time I've responded totally appropriately. I'm okay. Also, I'm not perfect." Perfectionism is, actually, a manifestation of anxiety as well.

Carly: I think my version of losing it was, " *And we're never playing any games ever again.*" It was big.

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Rose: I think every adult on this earth has said something like that to children. I wouldn't worry. It was obvious that you, in general, were very reasonable and rationale. When you said just something slightly, it was like, "Oh, she's lost it."

Carly: We've got look for indications, know the triggers of your students. We're doing this with the goal of keeping them in the classroom because that's going to mean that they're able to learn. We're trying to create an environment that they're able to learn. We're not standing in a door and stopping them from leaving or doing anything dangerous. The idea that they have a chance to learn when they're with us. That it's safer for everybody if we can keep them with us. We've got a range of different resources we can use. That's going to be in consultation with the school executive, school council. We're not just trying to deal with all of these kinds of things on our own.

Rose: No, not at all.

Carly: We're giving advanced notice especially around if there's going to be a casual teacher trying to preempt and pre-warn about a transition, whether that be to a new activity or lunch or a new break or returning from the break, or whatever it is. What's next?

Rose: Well, I really think the other people you need to get help from here are your parents. Your parents are a wonderful source of information about their child. Most of them are very willing to be supportive, as long as they're approached in the appropriate way, which is, "Look, I'm here to help your child. I want them to learn. I want to keep them in my classroom. I'm not going to complain about their behaviour. If this behaviour doesn't improve, then this child will be expelled," or something like that. You're not there to be punitive. You're there to be, "Look, we've got a problem. Perhaps we could solve it together."

The parent might actually be able to give you a great lot of insight into what the trigger is. What strategies they use at home. Also, support you through some of the things that you don't want to see at school. The other thing, I guess, you need to be aware of is that occasionally, anxiety can be a learned behavior, or maybe the manifestation of the anxiety can be a learned behavior because it actually leads to the student being removed from the classroom. If you're really anxious in a classroom and you act up or you do something like go and hide under a desk, that leads to you being taken to an executive office or your parent rung to come and get you.

I think we need to be aware as teachers that that's exactly what that student wanted to happen. And therefore, they've learnt that behavior so in a way, we're reinforcing that behaviour, we're making that behaviour continue. We need to break that cycle. The only other final thing I would say was, "Protect yourself. Step back, reconceptualise it as a disorder. Reconceptualise it as a "*Red Beast"* and say that awful "*Red Beast"* was in my classroom yesterday. Let's hope it doesn't come again today."

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Therefore, you're not having a negative view of your student. You're not having a negative view of yourself. The only negative view you've got is this nasty "*Red Beast*" who comes into the classroom sometimes.

Carly: Sometimes despite our best planning and intentions, and as far as we can, we were doing our best to make that.

Rose: Of course, we are. Yes.

Carly: Well, Rose, you're so good. We've got here a picture of what teachers could begin with and that's whether they're starting a year or starting a term or whether they found themselves in a situation and they realise, "Okay, this is a student who I need to get some help with." Are there things about the beginning of the year that are important to establish when you meet a student for the first time or when you're enrolling a new student, perhaps questions to ask or anything like that, or is it more a case of just deal with it as you see it?

Rose: I'm a bit ambiguous here, but as a teacher myself, who worked in the field of special needs, the more information I could get, the better I felt about a particular student. I felt, "Well, then I knew what had worked with." Usually, I used to start with parents and try to establish a good relationship with parents. Some people do say to me, "No, I don't want to know everything bad that happened previously in another school. I don't want to know about that. I want to start with a blank slate."

I guess, maybe if that's your approach, that's okay. However, I would like to say, "Be aware of what anxiety can look like and respond to it as anxiety, not as, 'This is a naughty child who has no social skills and shouldn't be in my classroom.'

Carly: Yes, yes. Not that kind of shutting off.

Rose: Off. Yes, yes.

Carly: Being open to getting to know that person however, that's going to be. I used to ask new enrollments because they would come around to get put into classes and things like that in a high school. I would try to ask, "Is there anything you think I should know about you?"

Rose: That's a very good question.

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Carly: They would often say no, but then I would follow up with, "Well, if you think of something just maybe come and let me know."

Rose: Some parents are actually a bit frightened when they're enrolling their students with children with extra support needs because they think they might be rejected.

Carly: That comes from bad experiences in other school systems, I think. Does it?

Rose: It does, yes. There is quite a bit of gatekeeping in some school systems. I'm not saying necessarily about the government system, but other school systems have used gatekeeping. I've written about that in some of my publications. They don't have the right to do that, but they do it.

Carly: Students struggle so much because by the time some of those problems are properly identified, they're in those really fragile early teenage years. They would have benefited from help so much earlier on. Coming into New South Wales public schools, it sounds Rose like some messages would be that "You're at school and nothing's a problem when you're at school. We can try and help you."

Rose: You have to make it a safe place for me.

Carly: This is a safe place.

Rose: You want me to be here, and so you've got to establish that genuine relationship. Even though some kids with special needs can be challenging. If you can distance yourself from the behavior and just look at the student themselves, then I think that that's really helpful. You've got to give them the idea that actually you're really excited that they've come into your classroom and you want them to stay there. That's a really good message for a student with special needs.

Carly: Oh, that's such a nice ending for our podcast too. Rose, thanks for helping us to better understand anxiety and also, how we can manage all of the students in our classroom and especially give the extra support that's needed for students with special needs in primary and high school classes. We so appreciate your insights and we really look forward to having you back at the CPL soon.

Rose: Thank you very much. I'm looking forward to coming back as well.

Carly: Wonderful. You've been listening to the CPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation. I'm Carly Boreland. I'm the Assistant Director of the CPL. I've been talking with Rose

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Dixon about supporting students with special needs in K-12, with their anxiety. To find out more and to listen to further podcasts, you can visit our website at cpl.asn.au/podcasts

CONCLUSION:
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More recently she has been actively involved in examining the relationship between special education and inclusive classrooms for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders as well as the implications of the NDIS on people with disabilities in rural and remote communities.
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